



Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Map and Characters](#)

[Chapter 6: Vampires](#)

[Interlude 4](#)

[Chapter 7: Mission 3](#)

[Chapter 8: The Road to the Lunar Landing](#)

[Chapter 9: The Final Simulation](#)

[Chapter 10: Launch](#)

[Interlude 5](#)

[Chapter 11: The Lunar Landing](#)

[Special Thanks](#)

[From the Author and Artist](#)

[Newsletter](#)



NOVEL
Z

Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

WRITTEN BY Keisuke Makino

ILLUSTRATED BY KAREI



IRINA LUMINESK

LEV LEPS

"I want more."
Irina sat on Lev's thigh,
her knee sliding between
his legs. Her hair was
like black silk tickling
his cheek, and her scarlet
eyes bored into his neck.



Road to the Moon

October 1960

Irina becomes history's first cosmonaut.

December 1960

Lev's manned spaceflight succeeds. Lev declares his intention to go to the moon.

April 1961

Bart's manned spaceflight succeeds. Bart declares his intention to go to the moon.

August 1961

Arnackian astronaut Aaron Fifield conducts a manned spaceflight.

September 1961

Lev and Irina meet Bart and Kaye at the 21st Century Expo. The threat of nuclear war looms.

May 1962

Korovin collapses due to illness.

January 1966

Mikhail and Roza are forced to marry.

November 1966

Zintra suspends its space program following Mikhail's death during spaceflight.

December 1966

Arnack suspends Project Hyperion after a fatal accident.

January 1967

Howling at the Moon is released.

December 1967

Project Soyuz completes Mission 1.

January 1968

Soyuz Treaty is signed. UKU/USR officially begin working toward a collaborative lunar landing.

February 1968

Bart and Kaye travel to Zintra.

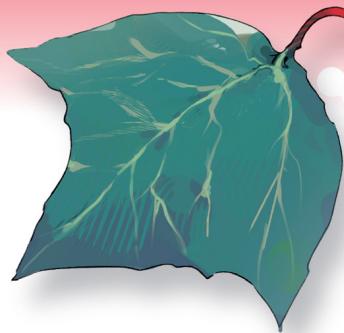
March 1968

Lev and Irina travel to Arnack.

September 1968

Project Soyuz completes Mission 2. Lyudmila dies of poisoning.

And beyond...



CONTENTS

⟨ CHAPTER 6 ⟩	Vampires
⟨ INTERLUDE 4 ⟩
⟨ CHAPTER 7 ⟩	Mission 3
⟨ CHAPTER 8 ⟩	The Road to the Lunar Landing
⟨ CHAPTER 9 ⟩	The Final Simulation
⟨ CHAPTER 10 ⟩	Launch
⟨ INTERLUDE 5 ⟩
⟨ CHAPTER 11 ⟩	The Lunar Landing.....

Луна, Лайка и Носферату

Original Cover & Logo design by Junya Arai + Bay Bridge Studio

Irina

The
Vampire
Cosmonaut

NOVEL



WRITTEN BY
Keisuke Makino

ILLUSTRATED BY
KAREI



Seven Seas Entertainment

TSUKI TO LAICA TO NOSFERATU Vol. 7

by Keisuke MAKINO

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Illustration by KAREI

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Characters

Луна, Лайка и Носферату

■ **LEV LEPS:** Zirnitran cosmonaut. Captain on Project Soyuz's final mission.

■ **IRINA LUMINESK:** Vampire and world's first cosmonaut. CSM pilot on Project Soyuz's final mission.

■ **SEMYON ADAMOV:** Zirnitran cosmonaut. Crew member on Mission 3.

■ **SLAVA KOROVIN:** Chief designer for Zirnitran space program. Mastermind behind Project Soyuz. Currently comatose.

■ **FYODOR GERGIEV:** Supreme Leader of the UZSR.

■ **ALEKSEY DEMIDOV:** Lyudmila's successor as Gergiev's confidant.

■ **ANYUTA:** Vampire. Raised Irina after the young vampire's parents were killed.

■ **BART FIFIeld:** Arnackian computing division engineer.

■ **KAYE SCARLET:** Arnackian dhampir prodigy and computing division engineer.

■ **AARON FIFIeld:** Bart's older brother. Captain on Mission 3.

■ **NATHAN LOUIS:** Arnackian astronaut. Lunar module pilot on Project Soyuz's final mission.

■ **ODETTE FELICETTE:** Arnackian dhampir astronaut. Irina's backup.

■ **TOMAS:** CSM pilot on Mission 3.

■ **PRIME MINISTER DOUGLAS:** Prime Minister of United Kingdom of Arnack.

■ **MISA OKAZAKI:** New employee at Hoshimachi Astronomical Observatory.



[This story is fictional. All characters, organizations, and names are fictitious and have no relation to existing people.]

United Kingdom of Arnack

GRAMBRIDGE
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

CAPITAL: ERIKSON, D.E.

HQ

EXPO GROUNDS:
MARINE CITY

The United Kingdom of Arnack

ROCKET LAUNCH CENTER

AERONAUTICAL
RESEARCH CENTER

IMPRISONED
ISLAND

CITY OF
New Marseille
(Laika Crescent)

ROCKET LAUNCH CENTER

MANNED
SPACECRAFT CENTER

Crescent Moon
District

Moonlight
District

RESEARCH
CENTER

FLIGHT
CENTER

MISSILE
RANGE

Союз
Цирнитра
Социалистических
Республик



Chapter 6: Vampires

Indigo Eyes

• очи индиго •

ON SEPTEMBER 27, 1968, the Neglin raised the Arnackian flag in Sangrad, Zirnitra's capital. It was a welcoming gesture on the Zirnitrans' part toward Prime Minister Douglas, who was making an official visit to celebrate Project Soyuz's successful second mission. It was the first time the UK's flag had flown in Zirnitra since the UZSR's founding, and many saw it as the beginning of a new era.

The prime minister arrived as a guest of the state, and a cavalcade of luxury cars escorted him from Sangrad's airport to the Neglin. Crocuses swayed in the breeze as the vehicles traveled the very roads Lev himself once paraded down to celebrate his achievements as humanity's first cosmonaut.

After a ceremony commemorating the UK and UZSR space teams' triumphs, Douglas would attend a summit alongside Zirnitran top brass. Having put the threat of nuclear war behind them, the nations were set to collaborate on more than just space development. Their discussions would also cover demilitarization and economic cooperation. The Cold War was finally ending.

Lev, dressed formally for the occasion, waited at the Neglin for the ceremony to begin. As he listened to citizens chatter away outside his dressing room window, he thought back on everything he'd gone through and was overcome with awe. At the same time, he knew the lunar landing was a ways away yet, and true peace was further still.

The UK and UZSR's relationship was built not on trust but on mutual interest. It was fragile, and it seemed as if the slightest disruption would bring it crashing down. Prime Minister Douglas's visit symbolizing international cooperation was largely for appearances; mistrust lingered on both sides. That was evident from the UK's decision to send the prime minister's own car with him, circumventing any risk of wiretapping.

This sort of behavior was to be expected, given that the

superpowers' rivalry had gone on for many long years. While Lev knew that small steps forward were the best anyone could hope for, he couldn't help feeling that something wasn't right. He had no idea Lyudmila's death would impact the future, and that uncertainty was like a rusty nail lodged in the pit of his stomach.

Zirnitran citizens and international reporters packed the ceremony grounds, and the excitement in the air hadn't been so palpable since Lev's parade. Every Zirnitran cosmonaut was in attendance, but Arnack had sent only Mission 2's crew members. The Zirnitran government hadn't set an explicit cap on their delegation; it was just the way things went. Had the UK hosted the ceremony, the head count of the attending cosmonauts and astronauts would've been reversed.

As the ceremony began, Lev stood at the side of the stage with Irina, who was hiding her face under a hood and parasol. She'd complained that morning about needing to stand in the midday sun. Perhaps the heavens had heard her, since thick clouds covered the sky.

When Mission 2's crew arrived onstage and shared warm hugs, the audience erupted in applause, celebrating the peace and friendship between East and West. Many in Zirnitra opposed that friendship, but potential dissidents had been removed from the premises, ensuring that news footage and photographs would capture only scenes of rapturous joy.

Supreme Leader Gergiev practically glowed as he shook hands with the beaming Prime Minister Douglas. "International cooperation in the field of space development is a hugely meaningful and important endeavor. We're already seeing incredible scientific advancements," the supreme leader said, addressing the crowd as well as those watching around the world. "Now that our peace-loving nations have joined forces, we'll lead the spaceship we call Earth into the future!" Gergiev's smile bloomed bright as a sunflower; it reminded one of the prosperity the UZSR had known in the early sixties.

Douglas stood tall and delivered his own dignified address. "Till now, the world was halved by an invisible wall. But we've reached the point where we can truly come together as one. The twenty-first century is fast approaching, and we'll ensure it's a time of peace!"

The crowd cheered. Lev applauded along with them, yet deep down, he felt that the statements were flowery and superficial. If he'd heard the politicians praise collaborative development ten years ago,

back when he was just a naive private second class, he would've jumped for joy. Now he knew too much.

Lyudmila's words flashed through his mind: "*Dismantling and reconstructing the UZSR... Control for both East and West.*" They couldn't be taken at face value; the woman had been prone to deception. But if those were indeed her two goals, how close had she been to realizing them?

It was supposed to be a day of celebration, yet the specter of Lyudmila's death put a hint of nervous energy in the air. The National Broadcasting Service stated that Lyudmila had succumbed to illness, but most doubted that. Lev found it strange that her poisoner was still at large and that her assassination had been covered up immediately. The mastermind likely had a strong foothold in the Zirnitran government, so chances were they had informed Gergiev in advance. The supreme leader would never have attended a public event in the wake of his secretary's death otherwise—he was deeply paranoid. Lt. Gen. Viktor believed Lyudmila's killer belonged to the organization she'd worked for, and Lev figured he was probably right.

Lyudmila's successor, Aleksey Demidov, stood at Gergiev's right. Demidov was a slight, older man who belonged to Zirnitra's upper leadership. He didn't make a particularly strong impression, and Lev had never met him in person.

Doubt whirled inside Lev's mind as he watched the crowd and listened to Semyon—a crew member for the upcoming Mission 3—address them. It struck him then that, with Lyudmila gone, it would be Demidov's duty to revise speeches delivered to the Zirnitran public.

Lev decided it'd be best to speak to Demidov to clarify his motives—and, if possible, those of the organization he worked for. There was still time before Project Soyuz's final mission, and Lev wanted to handle anything unexpected as calmly as possible. He had to see the final mission through, no matter what happened or what Demidov and his organization planned. The crew were going to do what'd never been done before, and Lev wanted Irina to feel proud of their historic achievement.

Irina heaved a languid sigh. She'd never enjoyed ceremonies like this.

"I want to go to the moon with Lev!"

Seven and a half years ago, at Lev's parade, she'd made that declaration right here on this stage. Back then, the moon was only a pipe dream. Now they neared it with each passing day.

Lev's heart ached as he thought of the people sacrificed for the sake of the rivalry between the UK and UZSR. He couldn't shed his disgust at being a puppet of those in power. His only solace was that he'd forged ahead by biting down hard on the hand that fed him. Now that the path to the moon was clear, he would do his utmost to protect it.

When the ceremony ended, Irina scurried indoors to take cover from the light, while Lev dashed over to Demidov.

"Do you have a moment to talk?"

Demidov wasn't in the mood. "Let's do it another time," he said, looking like a withered old tree.

Lev knew Demidov would continue to dodge him if they didn't speak now. Leaning close to the man's ear, he whispered, "You'd prefer that *Arnack News* buy the dirt on Lyudmila's poisoning?" Demidov shot Lev a stiff glare, but it was hardly intimidating—the man lacked Lyudmila's menace. "I won't take up much of your time."

Demidov's lips twisted into a snarl. He told Lev to meet him in a small room in the office of the Ministerial Cabinet, then disappeared.

The moment Lev entered the windowless meeting room, the scent of hair tonic stung his nose. It was coming from Demidov, who was already seated alone. At least, he *appeared* to be alone. Since Demidov had specifically chosen this room, Lev had no doubt it was wiretapped. He was also sure he'd hear nothing worthwhile if he played things safe, so he jumped straight to his most pressing concern: space development's future. "Will Mission 3 and Project Soyuz proceed as planned?"

Lyudmila had pulled strings behind the scenes, surreptitiously negotiating with the UK to make the manned lunar landing a collaborative effort. Lev didn't know whether things would change with Demidov in her place.

"Yes. All you need to do is play your part."

That told Lev something important: Demidov likely had sway over the Soyuz Special Committee, which was comprised of higher-ups from both nations. Now Lev had to find out whether Demidov was part of Lyudmila's organization. It was a risky move, considering he still wasn't certain the organization existed in the first place. Still, he had to take the chance. "With Lyudmila dead, what'll happen to your other plans?"

"What 'other plans' are you talking about?"

"Dismantling and reconstructing the UZSR. Control for both East and West."

"Hm?" Demidov's eyebrow twitched. Clearly he knew something. Lev watched him stroke his beard and tap his fingers on the table. Eventually, he pointed at Lev. "Have you talked to anyone else about this?" The fact that he didn't deny it all but confirmed the organization's existence.

"Not a soul. Irina was there when Lyudmila told *me*, though." Lev wanted to protect his vampire companion, but anything he hid now might snowball later.

"I see," Demidov muttered. "She even opened up to the vampire. Couldn't keep her mouth shut, could she?"

There was no grief in his voice. He obviously hadn't respected Lyudmila in the slightest—perhaps he saw poisoning her as - exterminating pesky vermin. Lev had worked with Lyudmila, and he realized that if he made one wrong move, he could become a target as easily as she had. Nevertheless, he had to know what Demidov's organization was up to. "Will you tell me more about your plans, Comrade?"

"Wait. I'll need permission."

Demidov left the room. He was cautious and clerical compared to Lyudmila; she'd been a maverick, but Demidov looked like more of a loyalist. At any rate, a new puppet master was pulling Gergiev's strings.

Demidov returned some ten minutes later. "I've received permission. I'll tell you of our plans," he said smoothly. "Our group calls itself the NWO for simplicity's sake, since our efforts follow the philosophy of the New World Order."

"New World Order...?" Lev had heard both nations' politicians and scholars use that term, but he didn't know much about it.

Lyudmila's voice echoed in his mind. "*A revolutionary to lead us into the new world.*" He thought of the rousing melody and fierce brass section of the record she'd played, as well as its title: "The New World."

"Comrade Leps." Demidov tapped the table to get his attention. "Let's move to the finer details. For one thing, your role is to become the first man on the moon. Have you any objections to that?"

"None."

Lev wasn't at all shocked to hear that he was part of the NWO's plans already. He'd thrown away his freedom the moment he became the first human cosmonaut, and that extended to Project Soyuz. As long as huge amounts of money and resources were being poured into space development, Lev would be obliged to follow orders dutifully. Yet if the NWO set out to indulge in war and genocide, he'd disobey outright—even if it meant his death.

"The NWO's goal is the peace and prosperity of the human race," said Demidov.

That *did* take Lev by surprise. It was in stark contrast to Lyudmila's recent horrendous murder. "How will you achieve that?" he asked cautiously.

Demidov adopted a professorial tone. "During the first half of the sixties, Arnack released a report stating that the UZSR would collapse if it continued on its course. Based on current conditions inside and outside Zirnitra, we believe that collapse is likely. Yet we can't simply cover our eyes and await our own downfall. After all, if Arnack grows too powerful, it may well destroy the human race."

Destroy the human race? Lev couldn't make sense of that. "Um... how so?"

"The danger of nuclear war would rise and rise. Look at it this way—when there's only one world power, hatred and discontent fester in other nations until they reach a fever pitch."

"You're saying the answer is to split the world between East and West?"

Demidov nodded. "As I'm sure you know, there's no point in recorded history when a single nation ruled the entire globe. War has always led to shifts in power and authority. Yet technological advances have produced weapons that could level entire nations in an instant.

Tell me, Lev—what would happen next if a nuclear shoot-out occurred?”

“That would end humanity as we know it. Break the world beyond repair.”

Demidov’s brow furrowed. “Humanity is foolish and impulsive. We share a single Earth, but our own species’ divisions could easily devastate it. Though it’s a global conundrum, the NWO is working to ensure such destruction never comes to pass.”

The pieces were finally coming together in Lev’s head. “So *two* allied superpowers controlling the world will prevent nuclear war?”

“In theory, yes.”

The NWO’s ideology seemed similar to “world government.” At the end of the Great War, experts who understood the danger nuclear weapons presented had called for a global power to govern all nations to prevent nuclear war. The UK’s previous prime minister had espoused it as well, stating, “We must eliminate the division between East and West and form a unified body.” The twentieth century’s leading physicist also called for a world government, recommending that it “be established by the two great superpowers, the UK and UZSR, since they possess the most military might.” The NWO likely followed a similar train of thought.

Still, something about this didn’t sit right with Lev. “World government” ideology stemmed from the desire for peace. The NWO’s goals likewise included avoiding nuclear war, but Eastern and Western superpowers *controlling* the world struck him as fundamentally different from pacifism. He dug a little deeper. “You expect the UZSR to collapse. How will it rebuild?”

“The plans are already in motion,” Demidov said in a gravelly voice. “Our nation was founded fifty years ago, and its strengths and weaknesses are abundantly clear. We’ll cut it free of its weaknesses prior to its collapse, establishing a new government before political upheaval occurs. By completing Project Soyuz, Zirnitra will maintain its dignity and status as a global superpower. Until a few years ago, we assumed both the UK’s and UZSR’s manned spaceflight programs were bound for cancellation. Comrade Chief’s project guidelines and the publication of your book through samizdat caught us off guard. That said, your betrayals actually set us on the right course. Many thanks.”

Lev wasn't sure how to respond. "Er, don't mention it."

Demidov's forehead wrinkled as his face again grew stern. "In any case, we're working toward a balance of power between the UZSR and UK—an alliance of friendship and equality. Balance in itself will only allow eventual decline, though. Both nations must continue to develop through healthy rivalry."

"Sounds like world government."

Demidov shook his head. "World government is little more than an idealistic theory. Unifying the world is impossible. We'll never see such a system in a million years. Besides, it'd be detrimental to provide people with a single option. By balancing ideologies and opinions, a government deflates voices of dissent before they run rampant. Maintaining that careful balance behind the scenes is the NWO's task."

That sounded like world domination to Lev. "Is such a thing possible? Even if the entire Zirnitran government backed that cause, the UK might well prove reluctant."

"We've installed our members among the UK's ruling elite. To control Arnackian citizens, you control public opinion. I should also mention, Comrade Leps, that the NWO doesn't *just* represent those two nations. In fact, so many powerful people worldwide support our goals that we hold an annual top-secret meeting."

Right then, Lev understood where his doubts stemmed from. Supporters of world government were truly worried about the future, but Demidov spoke of profit first and foremost. Lev didn't know the NWO's size or structure, but if its leadership included representatives of business and media conglomerates, they'd attempt to profit off avoiding nuclear war. Peace would be more of a byproduct. Still, diplomacy had been virtually nonexistent since relations between the UK and UZSR collapsed during the Cold War. In light of that, attempting to repair the nations' relationship only made sense if some force was pulling strings behind the scenes.

Thinking back on Zirnitra's past, Lev hit on potential examples of such string-pulling. The UZSR had undergone a famine in the early sixties, and Arnack—their fiercest rival—had provided wheat and farm machinery. A number of theories about those donations were thrown around at the time, but perhaps the two nations had bargained behind closed doors. Similar machinations had occurred when Lyudmila sent ANSA documents and negotiated Project Soyuz. And ever since Gergiev

became supreme leader, everything he did was in service of a new governmental structure in Zirnitra. He cut away remnants of the old government, fostered relations with the UK, and opened the UZSR to new arts like jazz music.

Demidov studied Lev, who was mulling all this over. “You’re curious about where space development will go next, are you?”

Lev lifted his head. “Very.”

“We will, of course, utilize outer space with peace in mind. For example, although it’s currently technologically difficult, we plan to launch numerous military satellites into orbit.”

“Military satellites?”

“At ease, Comrade. We’ll be using them in a defensive capacity to shoot down missiles from space. Those satellites will render military missiles obsolete, and they’ll phase out entirely.”

Even Lev could agree that that would be for the best. He wanted rocket technology to remain purely within the realm of space development. Irina felt the same way. Though it was wishful thinking, perhaps the NWO *was* working toward that. Maybe Lev had focused on their profiteering because he was raised in Zirnitra, where selfish power grabs were standard.

Demidov tapped the table. “We’re done here, aren’t we?”

“Uh...yes.”

“Before we conclude, I must confirm something. Once you complete your final mission, do you plan on going into politics?”

“No. I want to keep working in space development.”

“Very well. That path suits you better, I admit.” Demidov shrugged. “Zirnitra’s national rivalry has benefited us by pushing space development forward, positioning the East and West as definitive scientific powers. By the way, you’ve heard of *Earthrise*, haven’t you? It was much discussed.”

Earthrise was a photograph of the moon taken by a cosmonaut in lunar orbit. “Yes. It left a deep impression on people worldwide.”

“Myself included,” said Demidov. “It’s an amazing picture. But the lunar landing will surpass even that. It will bring prosperity to all, and people will take the power of science more seriously than ever before.”

It's no exaggeration to say that the world's future rests in your hands during that endeavor. Material rewards beyond mere military accolades await you."

Lev thought about that for a moment. "I don't need any rewards, but I do have a request."

"What would that be?"

"Let me choose the Zirnitran spacecraft's call sign."

"Call sign?"

"Mission 3's CSM will launch from Zirnitra, and the lunar module will launch from Arnack. They'll fly at the same time, and they'll each need a call sign."

The UK was letting the public name their lunar module, which would never be allowed in the UZSR. Lev had a name he desperately wanted to give the CSM, however. If Demidov had the power to give Lev authority over its call sign, he would reach for it.

"How about it?" Lev prompted.

Demidov stroked his beard, then nodded. "I'll do my best. I don't expect there to be any problem granting you that privilege."

"Thank you."

"All right, Lev. You're not to share what we spoke of here with anyone. Understood?" Demidov gave the table two decisive taps, then slipped out of the room like a shadow.

As Lev headed to his hotel, which was right next to the Neglin, he reflected on his talk with Demidov. He could get behind the idea of splitting the world between two superpowers if the goal was preventing nuclear war. He'd been through the threat of that once; he never wanted to experience anything like it again. Yet peace and prosperity seemed merely to be a front for Demidov, who in truth wanted the world under the invisible NWO's control. Was managing two global superpowers from behind the scenes even possible? Given enough time, wouldn't corruption take root?

"I don't have the faintest clue," Lev said to himself, conflicted. His

sigh was lost in the evening breeze.

However much he thought, he was ultimately up against an organization whose power eclipsed anything he could muster on his own. Perhaps the benefit of meeting Demidov was discovering that he was more open to negotiation than Lyudmila. Her lying and scheming had always enraged Lev, but Demidov was straightforward. Lev didn't trust him, but he at least knew what to expect, and he'd confirmed that both he and Demidov were invested in Project Soyuz's success. Demidov had also made it clear that he wouldn't interfere with the remaining missions.

Lev suspected that Lyudmila had been killed after getting Project Soyuz on track because she was no longer necessary. It was a pitiful way to go. *But was she hiding some other big ambition?* Lev shook his head vigorously. Trying to pry hidden truths from the dead was pointless. Banishing the ghosts haunting his mind, he refocused on Project Soyuz.

He briefly contemplated whether to open up to Irina and Nathan about the NWO's plans. Demidov had explicitly told the cosmonaut to keep the information under wraps, and Lev didn't want to drag Nathan into it if he could help it. Irina was another story. She'd already heard everything from Lyudmila, whose death had no doubt made the vampire curious about further developments. Lev decided to tell her as soon as the time was right.

He looked up at the mausoleum where they'd celebrated earlier that day. It was empty now, the stone floors awash in sunset orange.

So much had changed over the years. Lev had begun his career as an anonymous private second class, but he'd gone on to become humanity's first cosmonaut. Space development, meanwhile, had completely transformed after the exposé *Howling at the Moon* was published. Thanks to the upcoming lunar landing mission, the entire world was now on the brink of change.

Would that change be good or bad?

Lev couldn't say. All he knew was that he wanted to give Irina the future she dreamed of. At present, he hadn't a clue as to what that future was or how to get there. He couldn't see through the mist obscuring Irina's heart or know how she truly felt. His next move would be to peer a little closer.

Thankfully, time was on his side. Starting tomorrow, all the cosmonauts training in the UK would be off for a week—the only vacation they'd receive before Project Soyuz's final mission. Most were going home to see family and friends. Lev wanted to visit his parents, but he had to set things straight with Irina first.

He thought back to the worry he'd seen on Irina's face in the UK. What did the world look like through her scarlet eyes? Lev sensed that he, as a human, just couldn't grasp some part of her. Perhaps that was the cause of this gap between them. Deepening his knowledge of vampire culture might lead him to better understand her heart and mind.

Unfortunately, that would be no simple task. The vast majority of writing on vampires was superficial at best. The one human he could've consulted, Anya, had been transferred far away. Asking Irina directly would be pointless—she'd only avoid the topic. Lev wished he could talk to another vampire, but besides Irina, there were only the villagers in Anival tucked away in Lilitto's mountains.

He wandered near the mausoleum, lost in thought. A golden floor plate glittered in the sunlight, drawing his attention. He knew this place—it was where he and Mikhail once paid their fare to the moon. Mikhail had said it was “where all the paths to the Union’s future began.”

Lev stood on the plate, watching the sun sink on the horizon. *Humans found a path to the moon, but the sun’s impossible*, he thought. On the other hand, all paths were open when it came to the UZSR—there was nowhere he couldn't go. Lev’s own hometown was within traveling distance.

“Oh!” Lev gasped as it hit him.

What’s stopping me from visiting Anival?

Anival was in the far western region of the Union, in the nation of Lilitto. It would be a long journey, but Lev didn't mind using his vacation to travel there, and a week was plenty of time to go there and back. He could see where Irina grew up, talk to the villagers, and maybe get a better idea of their culture.

Ideally, he'd have visited Anival with Irina, but he knew she had mixed feelings about the village. She'd left eight years ago as a test subject and hadn't returned since. Even now, he remembered the guilt

in her voice as she spoke of the place.

“I went to a human city to pursue my dream of flying to space. To do that, I depended on the same technology that turned my home to scorched earth,” she’d said. *“They hate me. I don’t have a home to go back to.”*

Lev wasn’t sure how true that was. He knew nothing of Anival’s culture or what the villagers thought. Still, he felt Irina had simply convinced herself she was reviled—he was certain they understood her. They had to know she was honest, hardworking, and so committed to flying to space that she was prepared to die for it.

If Lev wanted to visit Anival before they went to the moon, this week was his only chance. And though he was sure Irina would refuse—she’d never return of her own volition—he wanted to invite her anyway.

Over dinner at the hotel restaurant, he casually broached the topic of her vacation.

Irina’s reply was blunt. “I’m going to spend the entire time here, sleeping.” She went on calmly eating her salmon caviar egg by egg, popping each between her teeth.

It was exactly as Lev had expected. “Semyon and the others are going home. You aren’t going to Anival?”

“No. I already told you, there’s no place for me there.”

“Because they hate you?”

“Because I betrayed them when I chose to live among humans,” she said dispassionately, sipping her still-hot borscht.

Lev had anticipated that as well. “Isn’t that just what *you* think? Couldn’t the reality be different?”

“Well, maybe.” Irina stared at her borscht, stirring it with her spoon.

Watching her reaction, Lev thought she’d just shut down completely if he suggested going together. He decided he should make his next comment on the matter his last. “I won’t ever force you to do something you don’t want to, but I feel like you might never go home again if you don’t visit now, before going to the moon.”

Irina eyed him with suspicion and disdain. “You want to make me go home, then?”

“Um, well...”

Her gaze sharpened. “Why even bring this up? Did something happen?”

Lev told her the truth; there was no use hiding it anymore. “I’m visiting Anival on my holiday.”

Irina froze. “To do what?”

“Enrich my understanding of vampires.”

“Why would you even need to do that?” she asked, confused.

“Honestly, I feel like there’s a wall between us recently. I think that’s partially because I only see things from a human perspective.”

“Wall? What are you talking about?” Irina muttered, glancing away.

“Look, I’m sorry I brought it up.” Lev donned a light, easy expression. “I just thought, if you were going home, we could go together. But I don’t mind going alone.”

“What?” Irina leaned forward, shocked. “You’re going by yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Stop.”

“What other choice do I have?”

“I said stop!”

Her shout drew glances from the diners around them. The two cosmonauts apologized with polite, embarrassed smiles.

Irina sighed, sipping her soda water. “Are you serious?”

“Why would I lie?” Lev asked, suddenly feeling guilty. He’d never imagined his decision would bother her this much.

“Anival’s isolated, and the military has it locked down,” Irina warned him. “It’s not the kind of place you can just go for a casual getaway.”

Lev lowered his voice. “I’m technically going on ‘official business.’ I, uh...kind of lied.”

Knowing that Anival was under quarantine, he had obtained permission to visit earlier at the Neglin. He’d expressed a desire to

promote racial reconciliation, and the higher-ups had been very impressed. “Using your own days off for the sake of our motherland? Amazing! You truly are a hero.” They’d approved his request on the spot.

Lev shot Irina a mischievous grin. “They manipulate us so much, it makes me sick. Sometimes we’ve got to use them too. Anyway, it’ll be an official visit, so I’m going with a small team—security, some Delivery Crew agents, and reporters. I already asked whether you could accompany me, and they said yes. In fact, upper leadership called the trip your ‘triumphant and celebratory homecoming.’ But don’t worry about a thing. I’ll tell them something came up and you can’t join me anymore. It’s not a big deal.”

Irina’s face clouded with thought. “You’re really going, then,” she muttered.

“Should I not?” Would he run into trouble? Could vampires hate humans so much they’d deny him entry?

“I just don’t like the idea of you asking the villagers about me if I’m not there,” Irina said bashfully.

He waved her off. “It’s not like that. I just want to meet the residents of Anival face-to-face, see how they live, and hear their thoughts on the manned lunar landing. And, all right—I admit, I want to know about your childhood. But the point is just to get a sense of the place where you grew up.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. I’ll represent Earth when I stand on the lunar surface, and vampires are the people of the moon, right? That’s what your necklace signifies.”

“Yes, that’s what they say.” Irina touched the blue stone around her neck and closed her eyes, lashes quivering with a hint of sorrow. Perhaps she was thinking about home. A moment later, she opened her eyes and went on silently eating her borscht. Her attitude told Lev their conversation was over.

Once they finished dinner, they took the elevator to their hotel rooms. After stepping out, Lev told Irina, “Good night. I’m heading to Anival tomorrow morning, so I guess I’ll see you once we return to the UK.” Irina said nothing, and Lev knew there was something on her mind. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m going with you,” she whispered.

“What?!” Lev was flustered. “You mean to my *room*?”

“Idiot. I mean to the village.”

“To Anival? Why the change of heart?” Lev peered at her closely, wondering what had come over her. “Not that I mind. You’re more than welcome. It just feels sudden.”

“When you brought it up at dinner, I realized I have to settle things.”

“Settle things?”

Irina nodded. “For the longest time, I’ve wanted to apologize to everyone. I abandoned them. I said they hated me and that I didn’t have a home to go back to...but those were just excuses. And you were right—if I don’t return before we go to the moon, I’ll keep running for the rest of my life. So I made up my mind. I have to go home.”

“I think you’ve made the right decision,” said Lev.

A relieved smile broke out on her face.

“Well,” he continued, “I’m sorry to make you deal with sunlight so soon, but let’s meet tomorrow morning at nine.”

“Got it. Good night, Lev.” Irina turned and walked down the corridor toward her room.

As Lev watched her go, his heart felt lighter. He knew she’d taken a huge step forward; returning home was just as brave as leaving. He prayed Anival’s villagers would welcome Irina back kindheartedly. If for some reason they condemned or attacked her, Lev would protect her with everything he had.

Arriving at Lilitto’s airport, Lev and Irina boarded a military truck and headed for Anival. An official news team and Delivery Crew detail accompanied them. There wasn’t much small talk—they were ostensibly paying the village an official visit, after all.

The truck bounced along unpaved roads for hours. All the windows aside from the windshield were curtained to protect Irina from

the sunlight, so the view was mostly hidden. Just as the passengers' backs and butts began to ache, the driver announced that the sun had set behind the mountains. The group opened the curtains to reveal the evening scenery, dense with birch trees. Irina peered pensively at them through the window, letting out a sigh.

The truck continued along steep forest roads, past signs that read RESTRICTED AREA. White mist draped around them, and the sky darkened. At long last, the vehicle pulled up to an imposing barbed wire fence. They'd reached the village.

Anival was supervised from a military operations facility next to a rusty steel gate. A stocky soldier confirmed that they had permission to enter, then allowed the truck inside.

Stepping out into the night, Lev winced at the icy wind nipping at his neck. He took a deep breath, inhaling the earthy scent of the forest. It'd been a long journey, but the fresh air eased his exhaustion.

Irina alighted from the truck and stood in silence. Lev thought about calling to her, but he stopped himself when he saw her lonely expression.

"I'll show you to the village," said the soldier overseeing their visit. "It's dark. Make sure you watch your feet."

Handing out torches, the soldier led them along a stone path through a ravine. Crickets chirped all around them, and pinecones rolled underfoot. The sound of flowing water told Lev there must've been a stream nearby. It struck him then that this was where Irina had been born and raised. An emotion he couldn't quite name swelled within him.

As they continued along a stone path bordered by steel fences, the soldier told them about Anival. "The vampires here eschew human technology. There's no electricity and no modern utensils. They live a self-sufficient lifestyle in harmony with the forest."

Navigating the path by torchlight was daunting. The news crew trudged along in heavy gloom. Even Lev couldn't help feeling wary, though he'd spent so much time with Irina that he didn't fear vampires.

"Do the villagers know Irina and I are going to the moon?" he asked.

"They do. I give them the newspaper when I'm done reading it."

That's their source of information.”

“When they heard we were visiting Anival, how did they react?”

“They were shocked, but there's nothing to worry about. They aren't violent like the legends claim. And if anything happens, you can rest easy—I'm armed.”

That was exactly the kind of comment Irina usually bristled at, but she said nothing. She'd been lost in thought since they arrived, and her expression hardened with each step toward the village.

The fence at the top of the long stone path was wreathed in winter-hardy ivy, or “plyushch.” Beyond that lay a valley enclosed by steep cliffs. Lev gazed through the fence at a village that would've been camouflaged even at midday.

Unlocking a secure door in the fence, the soldier ushered everyone through. The air instantly grew heavy and cold. Braziers offered light here and there, and the smoky scent of woodfires drifted through the air. Old stone houses huddled among the densely packed trees, but no one walked between them.

“Nothing's changed,” Irina said.

Perhaps the only thing that *had* was Irina herself. Despite leaving Anival as a Nosferatu Project test subject, she was now famous among humans. Regardless of whether her status and appearance had changed over the years, her core kindness and love of peace had remained constant. If the villagers understood that, they'd certainly welcome her back.

Lev, Irina, and their entourage found themselves in a circular plaza surrounded by braziers. Twenty or thirty people in traditional Lilitto garments stood there to welcome them. They were young and old, male and female, but all were vampires—their eyes were red, their ears pointed. It gave Lev a start, and he felt as though he'd been cast into another world. The speechless news crew shrank back, suddenly feeling like fish out of water.

One small elderly woman stepped forward, her ash-gray hair tied back.

Irina covered her mouth in surprise. “Anyuta...?”

A graceful smile drifted to the old woman's face, showing her worn-down fangs. “Irina. Welcome home.”

The woman's warm tone and tearful expression told Lev exactly how she felt. Irina wasn't hated in Anival by any stretch of the imagination.

Tears welled in Irina's eyes and rolled down her cheeks as the villagers greeted her. When Anyuta gently stroked her head, Irina lost all composure and embraced the old woman, wailing. It was the first time Lev had seen her cry openly in front of people. It dawned on him just how much Irina bottled up inside, and his own eyes brimmed with tears.

Thinking it best to give Irina the night with them, he made to leave—but one of the villagers called out to him. “Mr. Leps, would you be willing to join us for dinner tonight?”

Though Lev didn't want to impose, the villagers' gazes were so warm and welcoming that he knew it would be disrespectful to refuse. “Yes, I'd love to.” He looked imploringly at his entourage. “Could Irina and I mingle with the villagers on our own tonight?”

The reporters and Delivery Crew agents nodded, relieved, and headed back to the operations facility. The villagers began preparing dinner, which would be held in the moonlit plaza.

Irina's eyes were still swollen from crying. She looked sheepish as she told Lev more about the old vampire. “Anyuta raised me,” she began, explaining that the woman had taken her in when her parents were killed.

Irina had been just three years old. Anyuta taught her everything from reading and writing to how society worked outside Anival. When Irina decided to leave, the villagers had tried to stop her; they thought she was sacrificing herself. Anyuta was the only one who'd simply let her go.

“She knew what was in my heart.”

Glancing at Anyuta as the old vampire fed the fire, Lev sent her a silent, heartfelt message of gratitude. *Thank you for knowing that. And for raising Irina.*

Several villagers performed a folk dance at the beginning of dinner. Their smooth, beautiful movements reminded Lev of Irina's graceful skating on the frozen lake all those years ago.

Dishes served at the banquet were no different from what humans

ate. They included grilled fish, root vegetables, and a spitted goat. The latter was only eaten on special occasions. Anival's traditional cuisine was unseasoned, since vampires lacked a sense of taste. Lev had no complaints, however; the natural flavors were delicious.

Traditional homemade liquor—a dark, medicinal beverage with a mellow scent and unique bitterness—was served in wooden cups. It had a real kick, and Lev's temperature quickly rose.

Irina hesitated a moment before picking up a cup. "I'm having some," she declared.

"You sure? It's pretty strong."

Fearful that she might get carried away in front of the villagers, he reached out to stop her. By the time he moved, though, she'd already brought the cup to her lips. Thus, he prepared for her usual drunken antics.

As he expected, Irina flushed scarlet in a flash. The nearby villagers looked worried, but to Lev's surprise, she didn't become boisterous or start chattering away. She seemed perfectly clearheaded. With a sigh of relief, Lev wondered if her body was more attuned to this traditional beverage than foreign liquor.

While they ate, he listened to the awed villagers gush about her.

"Irina's an adult now."

"She's so beautiful."

Lev leaned over to whisper into the tipsy Irina's ear. "They don't hate you at all."

"No. You were right. I feel like an idiot for building this up into such a nightmare." Looking reassured, Irina tapped Anyuta's shoulder. "Does everyone know I declared to the world that I wanted to visit the moon with Lev?"

"Of course."

"Did they hate my saying that? Were they mad?" Irina's questions were surprisingly direct—liquid courage, perhaps. "I left as a test subject, but suddenly I was close with a human. That seems like reason enough to exile someone from the village."

"Nobody could believe it at first," Anyuta said with a wry chuckle.

"I thought so," Irina muttered.

“You volunteered to be a test subject, so everyone eventually worried that you might’ve been killed,” Anyuta continued, looking apologetic. “The thought that your bloodline would end with you saddened many. Then you were suddenly in the newspaper. We all knew the article included government lies, but it was still unbelievable. You really were aiming for the moon, and with a *human*, no less.” Agitation settled in the furrow of her brow.

Irina hung her head. “I’m sorry. But...why has everyone forgiven me?”

“There was nothing to forgive.” Anyuta cracked a smile. “We all cheered you on. You were giving everything to chase your dreams.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You leaped out into the wide world and pushed to travel beyond it. For those of us who will end our days in this cursed valley and never left it—like me—you are a ray of hope.”

“Hope?”

“We see our dreams in you. You carry the blood of our ancestors, and you’ve brought great blessings to our village and to us, the people of the moon,” Anyuta said, leaving Irina in stunned silence. “The more famous you become, the more humans will realize vampires aren’t monsters. Perhaps, in time, the day will arrive when we’re freed from this valley.” Anyuta’s scarlet eyes, mostly hidden under her heavy eyelids, settled on Lev. “I believe it’s thanks to you that Irina can live in human society. You have our deepest gratitude.”

“I really didn’t do much,” Lev replied. “Irina’s always been strong. She’s helped me far more than I’ve ever helped her.”

Irina blushed at the compliment, but Lev wasn’t being humble—he really meant it. Irina had been a source of courage so many times. Her efforts to become a cosmonaut inspired him, and she supported him when Mikhail died. Her encouragement had led him to his current position.

Anyuta turned back to Irina. “It may not be my place to ask, but what’s your relationship with Lev?”

“How do you mean?”

“You’ve been together for years. And you’ll share a spacecraft to the moon, won’t you?”

All the villagers' eyes fell upon Irina; they burned with curiosity.

She blinked, trying to work out how to respond. "Lev's a fellow cosmonaut, and nothing more," she said finally. "Right, Lev?"

The weight of the villager's gazes shifted to him, and he nodded. "Yes. We're partners, helping each other train every day." There was no way he'd tell them Irina had drunk his blood.

"Will you live in human society for the rest of your days?" Anyuta asked Irina, voice grave.

"Hm." Irina didn't respond immediately. It wasn't an easy question for her. She stirred her vegetable soup, lost in thought. "I haven't decided."

"Well, you'll always have a home here." Anyuta smiled gently. "I've ensured the castle is in fine shape."

Irina's eyes widened. "Really? I figured it'd be a dusty mess by now. I'll have to stop by later."

The word "castle" reminded Lev of something he'd discussed with Irina. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"To do what?" she asked. "It's not the kind of castle tourists come to visit, you know."

"That doesn't bother me. Didn't you say a book there had a drawing of the far side of the moon? I'd like to see." Lev also wanted to see Irina's old home for himself, but he didn't raise that particular point in front of the villagers.

Irina crossed her arms, mulling it over. Finally, she nodded. "All right. I suppose you *did* come all this way."

"Shall I join you?" Anyuta asked.

Irina shook her head. "Lev and I will be fine."

Lev's heart raced as the villagers scrutinized him again, but everyone respected Irina's answer—perhaps because she was the castle's princess and her decision was final. Or maybe everyone was simply aware of her stubborn personality. Beyond their gratitude that he'd helped Irina, Lev had no idea what the villagers really thought of him. As an outsider, he was ignorant of how they made decisions and conducted their relationships.

After dinner, Lev and Irina took wooden torches and headed to

the castle, which lay at the village outskirts.

“Anival’s tiny, so the castle’s only ten minutes on foot,” Irina explained.

“Whoa. You really lived in a castle, huh?”

“It’s not that special. We weren’t like lords ruling over the people. It was just because of my family line.” Irina’s necklace, passed down through the generations, symbolized that lineage.

“Look. We’re almost there.” Irina pointed at a gap between the cliffs.

Lev couldn’t see too clearly in the dim evening light, but an ivy-covered stone building slowly came into view. It was four stories tall—much bigger than the houses Lev had seen so far in Anival. As Irina said, it wasn’t the kind of fantastical castle one came across in books. Even Sangrad’s luxury hotels had more striking architecture.

Nevertheless, the old castle was an ominous sight in the darkness. Through Lev’s all-too-human eyes, it resembled a haunted house. When they reached the castle grounds, Lev saw the walls and front gate were crumbling. He couldn’t tell whether that was due to the passing of time or the ravages of war.

Irina pushed the castle’s weathered wooden door. It opened with a slow, haunting creak. Torch in hand, the vampire strode inside, lighting the beeswax candles that filled the candlestands. The orange flames flickered as they illuminated the room, and the castle interior took shape around them.

Irina covered her mouth in surprise. “It’s just as I left it.”

The main hall had a high ceiling, but it was devoid of lavish decoration. Aside from its lack of windows, it was like any human home. If Lev hadn’t known better, he would’ve had no clue vampires had built and owned the castle. It all showed him that the very idea of vampires living completely different lives from humans was simply prejudice.

Irina gazed around nostalgically. Then, remembering something, she turned to Lev. “The book’s in the basement study. Let’s go.”

She led the way down a narrow staircase. Walking through the darkness by dim candlelight made Lev feel like an explorer. Since vampires could see well in the dark, Irina probably didn’t need much

more light than this.

The room at the bottom of the stairs was arranged as a study; a stone cliff face served as one wall. The moldy scent of old books and the sweet aroma of beeswax filled the air. It was so surreal that, for a moment, Lev wondered whether he was dreaming.

The wooden bookshelves contained a few old titles Lev had never seen. They were mostly empty, however; at least half the study was unused. “Not many books, huh?”

“Most burned during the war,” Irina said sadly. “The Zirnitran military seized anything they considered dangerous or provocative.”

“Oh. So that’s why.” Human hands had obliterated huge chunks of Anival’s history. Outrage bubbled up inside Lev but had no outlet.

Irina picked up each book, looking at them in wonder as she sought the volume she’d described. “We were never allowed to leave the valley, so I spent a lot of time reading here, imagining the world beyond Anival. I believed all the fiction and mythology I read—I had all sorts of wild ideas.” She paused for a moment, then clapped, exclaiming, “Ah! That’s it!”

“Huh? That’s what?”

“My fear of heights! You told me a strong imagination can sometimes cause a phobia!”

“Right. I *did* tell you that.”

Irina gazed off into the distance, cradling a book to her chest. “Perhaps I wouldn’t have been scared of heights if I’d imagined the skies’ beauty.”

Lev wondered whether experiencing the worst of war at such a young age had traumatized Irina. Unlike the beautiful stars above, Earth would’ve been strongly linked to scenes of death and suffering. It would’ve felt hellish.

After some searching, Irina finally found a book containing a collection of sixteenth-century parchment manuscripts. It was tied with string, and the pages were smooth to the touch. It was still in good shape, but Irina handled the volume with great care.

The book seemed to document a world Lev knew nothing about. It was full of pictures of strange animals and a mysterious, cipher-like script. “Is that the original language of your people?”

“No.” Irina cocked her head. “No one can read this. And I don’t think any of these weird creatures even exist.”

“What is this book, then?” Lev was full of curiosity.

“Well, Anyuta told me it might contain someone’s imaginary illustrations of the moon.” Irina flipped the pages to reveal images of planets and constellations, all fantastical. “Oh! Look, Lev!”

She pointed at a picture of a round, moonlike object. It had been illustrated from both the front and back. The front was the same as the moon Lev had gazed at in wonder as a boy. However, the illustration of the moon’s far side was...perplexing. Irina had said it was the spitting image of the photographs taken via satellite, but the illustration was nothing like the high-definition pictures they now had access to. Or perhaps there were *some* similarities. Irina had made the comment about photos that were over ten years old, and very hazy.

Still... Lev couldn’t bring himself to voice his honest impression.

In the end, he didn’t have to. “It doesn’t look at all similar,” Irina griped, clearly disappointed. “Back when I saw those photographs, I really believed they looked the same.”

“Sometimes that’s just the way it goes, right?”

“I’m sorry I got your hopes up.”

“Don’t be. This is fascinating regardless. It’s how people saw the moon in their minds and their dreams. Even if the illustrations aren’t accurate, that doesn’t change the folklore about vampires being the people of the moon.”

“No, I guess not.” Irina closed the book, looking ambivalent as she reshelfed it. “I’m going upstairs. Are you heading back to the military operations facility?”

“Could I stay with you?” Lev asked. If Irina had told him to go back outright, he would’ve, but she’d given him a choice.

Irina put a hand to her chin, then nodded. “All right. The villagers have kept it tidy and ready for guests.”

They blew out the candles in the study and headed for the stairwell.

“How’s your visit been?” Irina asked as they walked upstairs. “Have you gotten a feel for the village?”

“Yeah. The buildings and food aren’t really any different from what humans have. Anival does feel removed from modern society, though.”

Anyuta had called the valley “cursed,” and her words were telling. The skies were open and free, but the terrain was isolated. The earth itself was imprisoning the vampires.

“Our people have lived with the trees, the river, and the natural world since ancient times,” Irina said. “But I think most humans want to picture something supernatural or creepy.”

“The villagers said your efforts are changing that, though.”

Irina chuckled. “They did, didn’t they?”

Unable to see her expression as she walked ahead of him, he couldn’t tell whether she was laughing at the strangeness of it all or at herself.

Irina wandered through the castle by the light of her torch, Lev trailing quietly behind. In their silence, all they heard was their own footfalls and the crickets’ echoing chirps outside. They passed through the kitchen, pantry, and living room. Lev could tell the villagers had spent long years safeguarding the castle despite its lady’s absence. They’d cleaned every chamber, though the rooms had gradually lost the air of being inhabited.

Eventually, the cosmonauts reached a room containing a mirror and bed. Irina opened a wardrobe and took out a long scarlet dress that appeared to be meant for a child. The garment clearly held deep memories; Irina lifted it and stared for a while, her red eyes glimmering in the candlelight.

There were parts of Irina’s past Lev still wasn’t aware of. He wished to hear about them but felt she’d always be somewhat closed to him, since he was human. Even so, until Irina told him to do otherwise, he wanted to stay in the castle and absorb the life she’d once lived.

Irina gingerly placed the dress back in the wardrobe, glancing at Lev before leaving the room. A hint of loneliness clouded her expression.

On the castle’s roof was a spacious stone balcony covered in green moss and surrounded by thick fog. Looking at the sky, Lev saw a

wavering, jade-colored aurora—a fine adornment for the shining, silver full moon.

Irina put down her torch. Removing her necklace, she held it skyward. The stone glittered with pure-blue light. “I used to come here all the time to look up at the moon,” she murmured. “Sinus Iridum... Lacus Somniorum...”

It was the poem of the moon. Irina chanted each word heavily, and Lev heard deep sadness in them. He listened intently as she continued.

“Palus Somni...” Irina’s black hair drifted on the wind, revealing her pointed ears. “Oceanus Procellarum...” There was unbearable pain in her expression. Her teary eyes were deep scarlet. “Mare Vaporum...” Like a fragile prayer taken by the breeze, her whispers disappeared into the far reaches of the evening. She looked up at the moon, gently clutching her necklace. “That’s an ode to the moon,” she said, still gazing at the sky. “But it’s also a requiem.”

“Requiem?”

“People in my village say the aurora is a bridge to the world of the dead, remember?”

“Yes.” Back when Irina was still called N44, she and Lev had skated on a frozen lake. Afterward, she’d told him about the aurora.

Irina held the pendant to her chest. “There are no graves in Anival. The smoke from a cremation rises to the heavens and forms a soul that crosses the aurora to the moon...our home.”

Lev wondered momentarily why she was bringing this up now. At first, he thought she wanted to emphasize that the poem was ultimately a dirge—wanted him to know, as a human, how she lamented the villagers his kind had killed.

Then he realized that wasn’t at all the case. The sorrow and reproach on Irina’s face were aimed inward. She’d been forgiven, yes, but only by those who still lived. As the last member of her family, she’d raised her necklace to the sky to confess her sins to the fallen.

Humans had enabled Irina to reach her dream. They were helping her go to the moon, which her species saw as a place of eternal rest. Not only that, but she wouldn’t even land there herself—instead, she’d ensure the *humans* accompanying her reached the surface safely. She

was going to aid in sullyng a sacred place. Here on the balcony, she was asking whether such an act was forgivable.

At that point, Lev understood the deep emotion inside her. It gripped his heart tight. “Irina, you—”

Smiling sadly, she cut him off. “When we get back from the moon, I’m going to live here.”

“Huh?”

“When Anyuta asked me about it at dinner, I was confused,” Irina admitted. “I’ve made my mind up, though. I know we’ll need to do lots of press when we return, so I’ll participate as a show of gratitude. But once that’s done with, I’m cutting myself off from human society for good.”

“Wait. Are you serious...?” Lev’s voice quivered as he grappled with his shock and uncertainty.

“I am,” she said coldly. “As a direct descendant of vampires, it’s my duty to live here. I have nowhere to call home among humans.”

“That’s not true. I’ll always be by your side. And what about Roza?”

“Yes, there’re humans I can trust and rely on, like you and Roza. But when I traveled the world, I saw I was an outsider. And I couldn’t just live with dhampirs. Odette looks up to me, and I really like her, but she has human blood in her veins. We’re different. Human science and technology are amazing, but I felt when I got here that a life of quiet suits me better.”

Lev didn’t know how to respond.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Irina said hurriedly, noticing his expression. “This won’t impact my role as CSM pilot. I’d never do anything as stupid as sabotaging the lunar landing for some petty revenge against humans.”

“I never thought you would. Not even for a second.”

“Thank you, Lev.” Irina ran a hand through her hair and smiled. “I *will* see you to the moon, and I *will* ensure we all return safely. I’ll finish repaying you for helping me reach my dreams.”

“Don’t talk like this is the end!” Lev cried, his emotions boiling over. “When we return, I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Irina's smile vanished. After a moment of silence, she faced him unsteadily. "I'm happy you feel that way, but I've made the decision to return to the village."

Lev knew he couldn't back down. Not here, not now. His eyes locked on Irina's. "I'll come too, then."

Her brow furrowed in confusion. "What're you saying? That's impossible—the government will never allow it. You'll be the man who landed on the moon. A hero! They'll drag you right back."

"Er, well..." She'd smacked him with an undeniable fact.

"And if the military forces you back to the outside world, they'll demolish this village."

"Uh, wait!" Lev scrambled for a leg to stand on. "I can't nail down a strategy right now, but I'll make it work."

Irina's icy gaze pierced right through him. "I don't want you to join me."

"Irina, I—"

"Don't come here." Her words left no room for argument.

Lev was speechless.

Irina heaved a heavy sigh. "I'm nothing but grateful to you. I was ready to die, and you gave me reasons to survive. You taught me how much there was to enjoy in the world, like soda water and jazz. And today, *you* brought me back to Anival—helped me realize my mistake. Now I know I have a home to go back to. Thank you, truly." She peered at the moon. "After we achieve our dream and reach the moon, I'm heading back to the world I set out from. That's as it should be. Now, I'm spending the night at the castle. Please go back to the military facility." The corners of her eyes glimmered in the moonlight. "It's time for humans to sleep. Good night, Lev."

Lev heard the slightest tremble in Irina's voice. At that moment, he knew she was being dishonest. It was just like when she told him she'd go work at the Design Bureau right before he took the cosmonaut candidate graduation exam. This wasn't how she truly felt, and Lev refused to fall for it.

"Enough."

"What?" Irina turned, avoiding his gaze.

“I want to know how you really feel.”

“I already told you. Don’t you get it? Stop thinking about this cursed village. You ought to live out there as a hero with the whole world loving you! You’ll reach for Mars next. You’ll marry some beautiful, fangless human and have an adorable child. All I want is for you to have a wonderful, happy life. That’s it.”

Something in her words tugged at Lev’s heart. Following the thread through his memories, he eventually seized on the moment Irina had changed. “You put this wall up that day we went to Roza’s house, didn’t you? That was when you started distancing yourself.”

Irina didn’t reply, simply looking skyward instead.

Lev thought back to their visit with Roza. Choosing his words carefully, he spoke again. “We picked gifts in Sangrad, then went to Roza’s and gave her the matryoshka dolls and tea. You held her daughter, Dasha, in your arms. I remember how lonely you looked afterward. That same day, you declared to me out of nowhere that you’d never marry a human. What were you feeling? That wasn’t about being an outsider, was it? Weren’t you hiding something else?”

Irina didn’t answer that either, just continued to stargaze. The silence between them was so deep, Lev swore he could hear the wavering aurora overhead. He refused to leave things as they were, though. He had to tell her his feelings outright. “I had another reason for traveling to Anival. Yes, I wanted to learn more about vampires—but I really want to understand you. I’ll never stop trying.” Irina still wouldn’t look at him. “I was arrogant to think I’d do that just by coming here. I’ll never see the world through your eyes. In the end, I’m human. I was raised completely differently. I’ll only ever grasp a fraction of what being you means. That works both ways, though, so don’t tell me what’ll make me happy.”

The vampire gripped the hem of her shirt.

“Please don’t lie to me, Irina,” Lev said softly. “Tell me how you honestly feel. I want to be with you. To spend the rest of my life understanding you little by little. *That’s* the happiness I want—there’s nothing else. And the lunar landing won’t give me that. Achieving dreams and finding happiness are two different things. I know you understand that because it was the same for you.”

“I do,” Irina whispered, wiping her eyes with a sigh. “Even after

going to space, I wasn't happy in the slightest. I'd wanted to be the first to do that, and my wish came true—but that was it. The beautiful sights took my breath away, but what I saw after that changed my outlook on life."

"What was it you saw?"

She turned to him, tears in her eyes. "I'll be honest. I had so much fun choosing presents for Roza with you. When I held Dasha, I thought of marrying you, and I imagined a future where we had a baby. I craved the joy that would bring me. But right after that, I saw a terrifying future for our child. It was awful."

"So that's what happened."

When they visited Roza and Dasha, Lev and Irina had discussed how those in power might use Roza's tragic story to garner sympathy and attention. It would be no surprise if those higher-ups likewise exploited a dhampir baby born to the first cosmonaut and the first man on the moon. Lev and Irina's child could never live an ordinary life, and nightmares of worst-case scenarios had overwhelmed Irina.

"I'm sorry," she said, staring at her feet. "I don't even know if we'll marry, let alone have a child. I realized I was overthinking things, but the moment I pictured that happening, I doubted we could be together. I just couldn't stop envisioning a world where you, me, and everyone around us despaired."

Irina had a powerful imagination, and her fear of a terrible future would be far harder to overcome than her fear of heights. She'd carried those worries with her to the UK, where she threw herself into training. When Lev thought of how she must've felt, his heart ached. Irina was selected for Project Soyuz's final mission in part because she was capable, but she and Lev knew it was also a matter of circumstance. Still, she'd stood tall through everything. When Lev was lost in worries about measuring up to Mikhail, Irina was there to cheer him on. That was who she was, and Lev couldn't bear to abandon her at this point.

"Irina, let's forget about children. For the time being, anyway. I'll give you the future you want." He stepped closer and put a hand on her back, trying to encourage and comfort her.

She remained tense, refusing to accept him. "If we stay together, I'll only be a source of endless struggles."

"Like what?"

“We...won’t be able to walk in the sun.”

Lev pointed to the evening sky. “We’ll settle for the beauty of the stars and the aurora.”

“But all the shops close late at night.”

“Maybe, but I can’t think of anything I’m desperate to buy.”

“When it comes to cooking, I don’t know anything about the human palate.” It was clear from Irina’s face that she was troubled—wanting to follow her heart but fighting her own feelings.

Lev tried to talk her through it. “You cooked for me the day we went skating. It tasted wonderful.”

“That’s only because Anya helped me.”

“If you want to cook for humans, you just need to follow recipes. You don’t even have to do that, though. The food we ate here was unseasoned, and it tasted great.”

“I don’t want you to give me so much leeway!”

“I’m happy to. It’s not something you have to worry over—or even think about.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Irina shook her head, running a hand through her hair. Moonlight shone on her ears, and her fangs peeked from her mouth as she spoke again. “What’s so good about me? You don’t have to pick a vampire. The world’s full of humans.”

“That’s true.”

“So, why not just choose one of them?”

“If I have to choose anyone, I pick you.”

“Lev... Me and you, we’re—”

They were never going to get anywhere like this. Before Irina could finish, Lev pulled her close and kissed her.

Sharp pain shot instantly through Lev’s lower lip, and he let out a muffled cry. He’d accidentally pressed one of Irina’s fangs, piercing his own skin. The rusty taste of iron flowed into his mouth as his lip bled.

Irina moaned. She put her hands to Lev’s chest and pushed him away, crying, “What’re you doing?! ”

“Sorry. I just didn’t think words alone would be enough.”



“St-still,” stammered Irina. “Talk about sudden!”

Lev smiled at the flustered vampire. “You’re right—there are billions of people on Earth. But there’s only one you in the galaxy.”

“Huh?”

He held Irina’s gaze. Now was the time to make his feelings crystal clear. “I love you more than anyone in the galaxy, Irina Luminesk.”

Irina’s snow-white cheeks flushed scarlet and her lips trembled, but she downplayed her response. “Y-you idiot!” she yelped, mussing up her bangs with a pout. “This is why they told you to treat me like an object in the first place!”

Lev shrugged. “Couldn’t you just have kept on hating humans?”

“Don’t fall for me, human,” she ordered, then noticed Lev’s lip. “Hold on. You’re bleeding.”

“It’s just a little cut from kissing you.” Lev wiped his lip, smearing the back of his hand. He swallowed and tasted blood instantly. The wound was deeper than he thought.

Irina sniffed the air. “It’s on me too.”

It wasn’t clear to Lev, given the darkness, but apparently there was blood around her lips.

The warm, metallic blood in his mouth flowed to the pit of his stomach. He put a finger to the cut, and pain shot through his lip. His fingertip was red; the wound showed no sign of clotting. Lev looked down at his hand, then back up when he felt the weight of Irina’s gaze. When their eyes met, she turned away with a gasp.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lev.

“I, um...swallowed your blood just now,” she muttered, her eyes on her feet as she fiddled with her shirt hem.

“Oh...”

“I *swallowed* it.” She glanced at Lev longingly—bashful, like a much younger girl.

At that moment, she felt so dear to Lev that his heart fluttered. “Irina...”

Before realizing it, he’d held his finger out to her. She tilted her

head skittishly, gaze darting from Lev's eyes to his hand. When he nodded, she let out a little gasp. He kept his eyes fixed on her, nodding again. Irina edged closer, wanting to be sure it was all right. Then her tongue poked from between her lips and lapped the blood from his finger. Its warmth sent a shiver down Lev's spine, and he broke out in goosebumps.

Irina bashfully took Lev's finger into her mouth and licked it, then released it just as quickly. Giving him a bewitching gaze, she moved closer, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Lev took her in his arms, lips parting. As her tongue slipped inside, he seemed to forget who and where he was. She sought out the wound on his lip, licking it tenderly. Lev's guard went up as her fangs poked his skin, threatening to nick him again. Still, he was powerless to resist; her eyes held him prisoner.

He dropped to the floor, placing both hands on the stone and looking up at Irina as she straddled him. The pale mist wreathing her served to highlight the green aurora and white moon hovering in the sky above.

"I want more." Irina sat on Lev's thigh, her knee sliding between his legs. Her hair was like black silk tickling his cheek, and her scarlet eyes bored into his neck. She reached forward. She knew she shouldn't, but her fingers trembled, driven by instinct.

Lev undid a shirt button, exposing his bare shoulder.

"Lev..."

Irina's head drew close. Her hair hid her face, but Lev could imagine what was about to happen. His heart raced, pumping blood through his body. The dangerous atmosphere aroused something in him. Irina's breath on his neck and the gentle touch of her fangs on his skin went straight to his core. A small moan escaped his lips.

Irina's fangs merely pressed his skin, never piercing it. After what felt like eons, she pulled away. Lev glanced at her face, confused and a bit disappointed. Irina's bewitching expression was gone—now she just looked awkward, embarrassed, and apologetic.

The change was so sudden, it worried him. "Irina...?"

She looked away. "I tried to bite you, but I couldn't go through with it—I realized I didn't want to hurt you."

“Huh? But, just now, you...”

It dawned on Lev that his lip wound had been accidental. Touching the area she’d almost bitten, he found she’d left nothing more than a little saliva. There was no bite and no bleeding. For a moment, he considered drawing his own blood, but that would’ve seemed bizarre, and it would just fluster Irina.

Irina sat on Lev’s thigh, shoulders slumped. “I’m a failure of a vampire.”

Lev couldn’t help chuckling.

“Huh?! This is no laughing matter!” She punched his stomach, pouting.

“Ow! Wait!” Panicking, Lev tried to explain himself. “Isn’t that better anyhow?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, ‘vampire’ is just something humans started calling you, right? I don’t know when they started using the term, but I bet it was somehow convenient at the time. You and Anival’s villagers aren’t monsters out of old folklore. You don’t *need* to bite me.”

Irina pondered that a moment. “That’s a good point. Actually, we’ve always simply called ourselves people of the moon.” She trailed off, confused. “In that case, what are we?”

“What do you mean?”

“Our species isn’t human, but we aren’t animals either.” That distinction didn’t accommodate vampires at all, which might’ve been one reason for Irina’s alienation. “I used to tell myself we were persecuted because we’re the people of the moon, but really, I was running away from the truth. I don’t seriously believe the old folktales or the superstitions about my necklace.”

If Irina didn’t know the name of her people, their very existence would feel uncertain. As Irina continued to sit on him, Lev tried to think of a good suggestion. He looked up at the moon, wondering what to call her. Then he remembered where they were.

“You’re an Earthling,” he said.

“Earthling?”

“Looking down from space, all the people on our planet are

Earthlings, right? That makes you and me the same.”

“Yeah. I kind of like that!” Irina smiled, relieved. “We all live on the same planet, after all.” Suddenly, she clapped a hand to her mouth. Tears welled in her scarlet eyes, spilling down her cheeks and dripping onto Lev’s shirt. “Sorry. Since getting here, I can’t seem to stop crying.”

Lev sat up and rubbed her back, then gently embraced her. “I’m the one who should apologize. For years, I didn’t realize how alone you felt or how hard things were for you.”

“Because I always put on a strong front.”

“That ends today, though. Going forward, we’re no longer ‘human’ and ‘vampire.’”

“Right.”

They still couldn’t say they completely understood each other; they had their differences. But having a new perspective on what separated them, they found their hearts were suddenly much closer.

“Oh! Sorry!” exclaimed Irina. “I’ve been sitting on your leg this whole time. I must be heavy, right?” She rose before Lev could say a thing, then sat beside him. “What were we talking about again?”

“You said you’d move back here when we returned from the moon.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Do you still plan to do that?”

Irina thought about it. “Even if I pleaded my case, I don’t honestly think the government would let me stay in Anival.” She sagged, a little defeated. “If I just tried to disappear, they’d track me down at any cost. I’d make trouble for the villagers.”

“Can’t deny that. And if we hid you, they’d suspect me. I’d be interrogated.”

He realized he still hadn’t told Irina about the NWO. The castle was the perfect place for that—it couldn’t have been wiretapped, and nobody was nearby. “I want to tell you something about Lyudmila’s successor and the organization he works for.”

At the grim tone of his voice, Irina donned a serious expression. “It doesn’t sound like good news. Will Project Soyuz be all right?”

“Yeah. *That’ll* be fine.”

“Sounds like there’s a problem elsewhere.”

“I don’t know whether it’s a problem yet. I can’t even tell if it’s good or bad. I think different people would see it different ways. Let me lay it out for you before I tell you what I think.”

Lev told Irina everything Demidov had said—that balancing the world between two superpowers would deter nuclear war and advance humankind’s scientific development.

Once he finished, Irina sat in silence. “Maybe it’s not bad,” she said eventually.

“You don’t think?”

“Well, I don’t know what’d happen to Anival if Zirnitra restructured itself, but that aside... Avoiding nuclear war wouldn’t be a bad thing. Still, I’m not comfortable with the idea of being *controlled* for the sake of the future.”

Lev nodded. “We’re pretty much on the same page. I’m not happy to see the lunar landing exploited, but space development’s always wrapped up in politics. Even if it doesn’t all sit well with us, the world’s at least moving toward peace. Of course, if Demidov’s group wanted to infringe on human rights, I’d reject them outright. But...” He trailed off. The future was so uncertain.

“Invisible hands shape history behind the scenes.” Irina sighed. “I suppose the only difference is whether you know that. If I weren’t aware of the NWO, I’d just go on living the way I always had. That’s how it’ll be for almost the entire world.”

“Yeah. We have no way to know which way things will move next. More importantly, everyday life is taxing in itself. We haven’t got time to hunt down the NWO even if we wanted to.” Cooperative development was a symbol of peace, and the lunar landing would mark the beginning of a new world.

Although the moon should’ve shone bright above them, it was blurred by a wall of pale white mist.

“Space is so pretty, it makes Earth look dirty,” Irina said suddenly.

“What?”

“You said that a long time ago. What do you think now?”

“Uh...” Lev now virtually belonged to an organization sullying

Earth, and they'd soon go on to defile space. He swallowed. Tasting his blood's metallic flavor again made him queasy.

“You love space. I can tell you how to protect it,” Irina said.

“Huh?” Lev glanced at her.

She flashed a mischievous grin, fangs peeking from her mouth. “Sabotage the lunar landing. Put an end to space development.”

“What...?”

“If you do that, the moon and stars will never be contaminated.”

Lev was lost for words.

Irina relaxed, donning a gentle smile. “Even that gesture would be pointless, though, so better land on the moon before anyone else sullies it. You’ll be carrying hopes and dreams with you, Lev—those of the hundreds of thousands of people working in space development and around the globe. You’ll be taking the very first steps on an all-new world. Right?”

“Irina...”

“We aren’t as naive as we used to be, so we can’t look at the sky with the naive hopes we once held. But one thing hasn’t changed.” Resting a hand on Lev’s left arm, she went on with tenderness in her voice. “The blood in your veins is as pure as always.”

Irina’s eyes had never stopped being beautiful. They moved Lev, and warmth flowed through his body. It prompted him to reexamine his goals.

Why was he so confused about this? Looking at it now, everything seemed simple. If the NWO tried to use him for nefarious purposes or lay claim to Anival, he’d fight them tooth and nail.

A resolute feeling settled in Lev’s heart. He clasped Irina’s hand. “I promise to make the lunar landing a success.”

Irina slowly got to her feet, leading Lev through the mist to the balcony’s edge. She looked up at the moon shining over the world below. “I, Irina Luminesk, will visit you all alongside Lev Leps.” Her voice brimmed with confidence. “I’ll await our return from the skies, and then Lev and I will live together, even if you deem it unacceptable. Such rules no longer concern me. I am free of the curse the humans placed on us.”

Irina's race, the people of the moon, were still shunned and persecuted as a "cursed species." Nevertheless, standing beside this castle's princess, Lev pledged to himself that he'd stay with her for the rest of his life. He and Irina would leap into the new era with an adventure for the history books.

Interlude 4

I

IN FEBRUARY OF 1969, Misa Okazaki sat in shock on the floor of the Hoshimachi Astronomical Observatory. Sheets of paper littered the floor where she'd dropped them. The observatory chief had just given Misa a report that contained astounding news for their home of Hoshimachi—nicknamed “Star Town”—a small town in an island nation in the East.

“Th-this isn’t some kind of joke, is it?!” Misa cried, tears welling in her eyes.

The observatory chief shook his head. “No jokes here, I assure you,” he said, chuckling. “While it isn’t official yet, it’s a sure thing.”

ANSA and Zirnitra’s National Institute of Science had asked to use the Hoshimachi Astronomical Observatory as a reserve ground station, tracing flight paths and handling radio transmissions during Project Soyuz’s final mission. Misa still couldn’t believe her ears. Her *own observatory* would be part of the lunar landing? It was a dream come true.



“Once the contract’s finalized, they’ll deliver the equipment and machinery they need to support the lunar landing,” the observatory chief told Misa as he picked up the scattered papers.

Misa still couldn’t move. She was completely dumbstruck. She’d always been an avid supporter of Project Soyuz, but as a new observatory employee, she’d never expected she might actually play a role in it.

But maybe, just maybe...

That word—*maybe*—had been a tiny flame of hope in her heart. She’d known ANSA and the National Institute of Science were searching for reserve ground stations. And since the Hoshimachi Observatory boasted the world’s largest radio telescope, it had no doubt been on their candidate list. That alone had made her feel optimistic.

For the historic lunar landing to succeed, tracking and communicating with the spacecraft throughout its 380,000-kilometer journey would be incredibly important. The world was always turning, so there was a limit to how much the UK and UZSR could handle on their own. Therefore, they were building a radio network that would transcend borders. At present, there were over ten relay stations worldwide. They’d also equipped boats and planes with the necessary electrical equipment. It all amounted to a real-time communications network.

That alone wouldn’t be enough. To explore the moon’s surface, they’d also have to consider lunar rotation, which meant they’d need to reinforce radio communications. If they couldn’t contact the crew during lunar surveyance, there’d be no way to warn them about a solar flare or other mortal danger. The numerous reserve ground stations would prevent such threats, and the Hoshimachi Observatory was a perfect candidate.

Her work done for the day, Misa sat to hungrily devour the Project Soyuz documents. She had begged on hands and knees for a chance to look at the paperwork before the observatory chief finally agreed.

February would see testing for Mission 4 completed. The final mission’s tests were due to wrap up in April. Once testing finished, the missions would begin. Mission 3 was set for August, and once it began, failure was not an option.

“Wow.” Misa sighed. “This is all so thrilling!”

The lunar landing was a hot topic, and even Hoshimachi was caught up in the excitement. Eight years before, Lev and Irina had traveled through the nation during their worldwide tour. They’d given a speech entitled “Prepare for Space Travel!” It had left a deep impression on Misa, who was just a junior high schooler then. She and her best friend had dreamed of the stars above, and though the journey came with sorrows, Misa overcame her strife and achieved her dream of working at the observatory.

Lev and Irina were global heroes, and Misa knew there was no way they’d remember her, despite the fact that she’d shaken their hands and gotten their autographs. Even if those memories were hers alone, the mere thought of helping the two cosmonauts on their next adventure made her so happy she could cry. At the same time, Misa was a brand-new employee. Her lack of knowledge and experience meant she mostly served as a clerical assistant. On top of that, the Hoshimachi Observatory would just be a *reserve* ground station; it might not be used at all.

None of that mattered. Misa was going to be an actual participant in Project Soyuz!

She got so lost in reading that she was surprised by how late it was when she finally finished. Wrapping herself in her cherry-blossom-pink scarf, she left the observatory. The chilly evening air was typical for February, but Misa was so fired up she barely noticed. She stood outside the empty building, and her eyes followed the observatory’s parabolic antenna to the far reaches of the sky.

“Hey,” she murmured to the stars. “Remember when you said it’d be great to play some small role in the lunar landing? Well, that dream’s about to come true!”

As Misa prayed to the moon for success, a gentle wind blew past, and her pink scarf danced in the air.

Chapter 7: Mission 3

Blue Eyes

O

N JULY 16, 1969, Project Soyuz personnel completed Mission 3's final CSM inspection at a huge hangar in the Albinar Cosmodrome. Bart had overseen the inspection. He took off his glasses and wiped sweat from his brow.

"Finally, we're ready for blastoff!" he said, turning to Kaye.

As Kaye finished up her documentation, she replied, "Amazing! I'm so happy. A year ago, we couldn't have wrapped our heads around finishing this way. Zirnitra's engineering team really hit the ground running."

There was clear admiration in Kaye's voice as she gazed at the gleaming, silver-bodied spacecraft. The eleven-meter-tall craft was completely outfitted with a rocket engine, service module stocked with the required consumables, and crew-piloted CSM.

The conical CSM measured three by four meters, and its pointed tip held everything needed to dock with the lunar module. Its interior was packed with over five hundred switches, seventy-one indicator lights, and twenty-four meters and gauges—more than two million working parts overall. It was a complicated craft and difficult to pilot.

Project Soyuz's biggest concern was installing Arnack's Hyperion Guidance Computer in Zirnitra's Rodina CSM. Installation had been approved during a binational meeting, but compatibility issues were expected. The module's HGC was currently operating smoothly, and Kaye could handle shortcomings remotely from Earth. There was one glaring problem with that strategy: if she made an error during the mission, she might be the only one who could fix it.

Still, Bart and Kaye had pushed hard and made her part of the mission. Her participation would be Project Soyuz's only chance of reaching the moon on time. A year before Mission 3's launch date, both nations' engineers had begun running themselves ragged to ensure

compatibility between craft and computer.

The UZSR's Party for Future Technological Development, led by Director Volkov, was especially proactive. Negotiating with higher-ups, the passionate Volkov declared, "We've accepted the recommended 'fourth crew member,' Kaye Scarlet, but we refuse to sit back and rely on the sorceress's magic. We've lost to her at computers and at chess, but that streak won't continue!"

Since the UZSR personnel could leave rocket and lunar lander construction to the UK, they focused their resources on the CSM, throwing themselves into fine-tuning HGC compatibility. Their ability to work together toward a goal was hugely impressive. It seemed as if the Zirnitran team had rediscovered the enthusiasm that drove them at the beginning of the Space Race, and their passion stoked the fire of competition in the UK engineers. The mad dash of development that followed allowed Project Soyuz to produce a fully HGC-compatible spacecraft: the New Rodina.

They'd built the New Rodina so rapidly that the craft's accuracy had dropped, despite its HGC compatibility. A new issue thus emerged —they'd need to handle recalculations on Earth. ANSA's control center possessed five dedicated ACE Alpha computers for calculations, but each had a specific role, and there was a risk they'd freeze if overloaded. ANSA's budgetary limitations meant simply adding a new computer would just be too expensive. The engineering team now had to consider hiring a number of human calculators to handle recalculations.

Kaye had a suggestion of her own, which she brought to Director Volkov. "I, uh...happen to be very good at calculations," she'd said tentatively.

The Zirnitrans were skeptical, but when Kaye proved her extraordinary mathematical abilities, Volkov couldn't keep his jaw from dropping. "Even after all our efforts, we'll have to rely on your magic," he muttered, incredulous.

Handling recalculations on Earth *was* seen as much safer than the last resort that Bart and Kaye had first proposed. And the pressure was no longer on Kaye alone, since extra team members could help her handle recalculations. Ultimately, the New Rodina was cleared for use in Project Soyuz.

When they sent the new spacecraft into Earth's orbit for an

unmanned test, Kaye masterfully processed all necessary recalculations. A few small modifications later, the spacecraft was complete. Kaye couldn't stop smiling—she was certain Mission 3's success was assured.

Bart had high hopes as well, but he was worried about two things in particular.

The first was Kaye's physical condition. Work that required great focus took a huge physical and mental toll on Kaye. After the New Rodina's unmanned test, Kaye shut down like a toy that had run out of battery. Five minutes later, she'd mumbled about being hungry, which was something of a running joke. Still, it concerned Bart that a return trip to the moon took over a week.

Kaye's abilities put her on par with computers, but that didn't make her a machine. She was a living, breathing dhampir, and her endurance was already below average due to her lack of exercise. Even a few flights of stairs left her breathless. Kaye knew that was a problem, but she hadn't considered working out. Rather, she began eating more—mostly sweets—to boost her strength and energy.

As a result, she'd put on weight. Bart didn't say a thing, but he didn't need to. Once Kaye noticed it herself, she occasionally rubbed her arms and midriff and sighed. Bart thought she looked fine and, moreover, as adorable as ever. Since he was anxious about her health, however, he suggested they both start exercising.

Bart's second worry was that, as of Mission 3, he'd no longer be able to support Kaye during or between missions. Although Bart had always been by Kaye's side, an update from Division Chief Brian Damon had changed everything.

Bart had been offered a ground control position at the Manned Spacecraft Center. His role would be "guidance officer," or "GUIDO" for short. It was an important position—Bart would manage and supervise HGC operations as well as the spacecraft's guidance, navigation, and control systems.

Every ground control officer represented their area of expertise; the appointment meant the higher-ups recognized Bart's many years working with computers since his humble beginnings in D Room. That alone was a true honor. Furthermore, when Bart learned which ground control team they were assigning him to, he simply couldn't believe it.

The teams were divided according to the four launch stages:

launch and extravehicular activity, lunar landing, launch from the lunar surface, and return. Bart had been put on the lunar landing team, so in the final mission, he'd watch the lunar module computer's operations during descent. He'd be right there with the crew attempting the first-ever lunar landing. There was no higher honor for an engineer participating in Project Soyuz.

Yet Bart hesitated when he learned of his appointment. Would Kaye be all right on her own? Would she work to the point of collapse? Was he even capable of serving on the ground control team?

He shook those doubts off instantly. Running away from a chance like this was unthinkable. Kaye would have trustworthy, experienced people around, and Bart knew she'd be fine. On top of that, he *had* to do this—he'd promised to be worthy of Kaye. Bart was a self-made man, like his brother Aaron, and he'd live up to everyone's expectations. He had dreamed of this moment since he was a boy, and now he would see his dream come true—he'd watch a spacecraft land on the moon for the first time in history.

In the end, there was only one response to Damon's offer. "It'd be an honor, sir!" Bart said confidently.

"Show us what you've got," Damon replied. Bart would never forget the smile on the division chief's face.

When Bart told Kaye about his ground control role, she jumped for joy. Tears sprang to her eyes, and he knew right then that he'd made the right decision. Even so, he felt the weight of the mission on his shoulders—failure would mean disgrace, widespread criticism, and embarrassing the Fifield name.

Kaye poked his arm. "What's on your mind, Bart?"

Bart snapped back to reality. "We're so close now," he said, adjusting his glasses and stretching. "It's making me think about all kinds of things."

They'd traveled between the UK and UZSR repeatedly to reach this day, and finally, they were going to see their efforts pay off. Mission 3 was just a month away. Since the groundwork was laid six months earlier, the mission's spacecraft and rocket had been transported to their launch site and assembled. Preparations for Mission 4 and the final mission were already underway. The air was electrified, and the pressure was on. The lunar landing was fast approaching.

If not for Project Soyuz's creation, July would've marked Hyperion 11's first lunar landing attempt. Since cooperative development was in full swing, though, that first attempt would take place five months later. No one could deny that the Soyuz Treaty had been motivated by tragic accidents, but in truth, Bart was glad the UK and UZSR were collaborating. If Project Soyuz had never come to pass, he would never have met the people he now called comrades. They never would've joined forces to strive for their goal.

While Bart and his team visited the UZSR, Zirnitrans were learning computing skills in the UK. Arnack's bustling cities shocked them, but they seemed to enjoy their days—though they were skeptical about how much freedom the citizens had. At one point, the two nations had needed to bridge a deep divide between their cultures and customs. Now they were on track to completing the path to the moon.

Their work in the hangar done, Bart and Kaye stepped out into the blazing sun. They were heading for the station to return to Albinar's commercial and residential district, but the stifling heat made it hard to breathe.

Before long, Kaye was panting. "This might be the hottest place I've ever been."

"Never would've imagined it'd be warmer than New Marseille." Bart took off his glasses, wiping away the sweat threatening to drip into his eyes.

New Marseille was in the UK's south, and its summers were made up of days and days of thirty-five-degree heat. Still, that was nothing compared to Albinar, which got as hot as forty-five degrees Celsius. Nights in Albinar, however, were freezing cold; Zirnitran weather was hard to get used to.

Bart looked out at the rocky desert beyond the fences surrounding the city. The climate was completely different from Sangrad's, and it was like coming to an entirely new continent. Nevertheless, the city square's statue of the supreme leader and the signboards celebrating Lev Leps's spaceflight made it crystal clear that Albinar was Zirnitran territory.

"Wonder what Aaron will think when he comes here," Bart muttered.

With Mission 3's launch fast approaching, it wouldn't be long

before Aaron and his crew flew over from the UK. Bart knew Zirnitra's "welcoming customs" all too well. The astronauts' bus to and from the airfield would have covered windows; the same went for their hotel rooms. Their movements around the city would be restricted, and they'd make phone calls with the understanding that someone listened to every word.

"Aaron wouldn't be stupid enough to get on the Delivery Crew's bad side, would he?" Kaye whispered.

"At the very least, this trip'll deepen his Arnackian patriotism," Bart quipped.

"It did the same for me. I'm not confident I could ever live here safely."

"Me neither. Nerd Heaven's the place for me. At least we can make whatever we want there."

The change of topic reminded Bart of something that'd been nagging at him. He'd overheard a couple of Zirnitran engineers chatting in the bathroom while he sat in a toilet stall.

"At least we could look Comrade Chief in the eye now," one said.

"Maybe we wouldn't be losing to the sorceress if he woke up," replied the other.

The secret conversation filled Bart with curiosity. Who was this "Comrade Chief"? The same "Chief" he remembered Lev and Irina mentioning at the 21st Century Expo? The chief designer he'd read about in old newspaper articles? *Howling at the Moon* had called the chief designer K. E. Tukhachevsky, almost certainly a fake name. There'd been no Tukhachevskys in cooperative development up till now, and "Tukhachevsky" hadn't written any documents for Project Soyuz.

"Hey, Kaye. Any idea who the Zirnitran engineers' chief could be?"

Kaye cocked her head. "You mean other than Director Volkov?"

"Yeah. Volkov's a scientist, after all."

"Right. Their chief, huh?" Kaye dropped into serious thought.

Bart panicked. "If you don't know, don't worry about it," he said, lowering his voice. "I think it's confidential, anyway..."

Kaye put a hand to her mouth nervously. “All right. Consider it forgotten.”

She knew as well as Bart that, if they dug too deep into UZSR secrets, the Delivery Crew would knock on their doors again. Bart decided to leave the topic to their imaginations. Perhaps the chief the Zirnitrans respected so much was the rumored Sorcerer of the East, who’d been left out of Project Soyuz entirely; his existence was currently hidden from the public eye.

Putting aside the thought that this so-called “Comrade Chief” could “wake up” and help, Bart simply hoped he or she was present when the lunar landing succeeded. Whoever the chief designer was, Bart was certain the lunar mission was their long-held dream.

What had happened to the person the Zirnitran engineers called the “chief”? Illness? Accident? Foul play? Why did the UZSR hide them? Bart couldn’t help feeling sad at the thought that they might only have been kept anonymous for the sake of the Space Race. Space development had seen many casualties, but the only loss the UZSR publicized was cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin. Perhaps other souls rested alongside him. Peering past the fence at a lone monument, Bart found himself suddenly lost for words.

“I felt like a criminal being sent into exile!”

That was the first thing Aaron said upon reuniting with Bart at the Albinar Cosmodrome. The UZSR’s weather and lack of freedom had left him at his wits’ end.

“Still,” he added jokingly, “they say the moon’s desolate, cruel, and unforgiving, so I’ve thought of this as training for *that* environment.”

Aaron was captain of Mission 3, which would complete various surveyanse tasks and tests—most importantly, a rendezvous and docking procedure with the New Rodina CSM and a target drone. Up to this point, neither Aaron nor his crew had even touched the top-secret, carefully safeguarded New Rodina. They’d been left to practice in a simulator and life-size replica.

The test Bart and Kaye was running today was the first time Aaron's crew had seen or entered the New Rodina. They'd have just one month to get used to the craft. Bart's nerves were fraying, but he believed in his brother. In the end, there'd been nothing to worry about. The crew quickly settled in to the New Rodina, and they had no issues using the HGC. They *were* the best of the best—they'd all been carefully selected to represent their home planet. And yet, their aptitude impressed everyone in attendance.

One crew member, Semyon, was especially proud of his team. "Not bad, huh? We've got the UK's fantastic simulator to thank for that!"

"All those amazing skills, yet the lunar module pilot's basically a passenger," Aaron joked, grinning back. "What a waste."

"Knock it off, Captain!"

Aaron's comment had hit a sore spot. Semyon had learned to pilot the lunar module but wouldn't actually control it, since Mission 3's "lunar module" was really a manned surveillance satellite. Semyon's tasks would boil down to confirmation checks after they'd docked successfully.

It was a huge relief to Bart to see the crew getting along so well. Sensing the trust they'd developed through training, he knew they'd function well as a team over the long, arduous journey ahead.

When the test finished, Aaron addressed the Zirnitran engineers, sounding full of confidence. "I'm sure the mission ahead will be challenging, but I can feel our two nations' scientific might in this spacecraft. I'm certain we'll succeed. All we need do is obey the mission guidelines and follow the detailed flight plan prepared by our scientists and engineers. If we do, the outcome's plain as day."

The mission guidelines contained instructions for addressing every conceivable situation during spaceflight, from launch trouble to astronaut infirmity. Project Soyuz involved two nations, yet in a life-or-death emergency, it would be imperative that everyone was aligned. Thus, the mission guidelines contained clear-cut "proceed" and "abort" conditions allowing crew members to make snap judgments. An "abort" judgment would end a mission; although the lunar missions would be literally life-threatening adventures, crew survival was the first priority.

Division Chief Damon had supervised the meeting that established

the mission guidelines. Bart, Kaye, specialists from each division, and the astronauts themselves had input. After much discussion, they compiled more than a thousand topics in a book over three hundred pages thick. Everyone involved in Project Soyuz received a copy, and those in charge of missions referred to the guidelines whenever there was trouble. That didn't mean the mission guidelines were *complete*; they were revised and verified constantly. It all demonstrated that the lunar landing was a gargantuan task unlike any in Earth's history.

When Mission 3's crew began their final preparations, Bart and Kaye would return to the UK. The main mission control center was in New Marseille, since the large general-purpose computers synced to the HGC couldn't be set up in the UZSR. Albinar would handle Mission 3's spacecraft launch, then pass New Marseille control duties for the rest of the flight.

That decision came as a huge relief to Bart and Kaye. Working on-site in Arnack would spare them from Zirnitra's ever-watchful Delivery Crew. Bart's hair stood on end when he thought back to the time he and Kaye were virtually kidnapped by the UZSR's secret police. That was the most terrified he'd been in his life.

The incident with the Delivery Crew was the reason he and Kaye had finally opened their hearts to each other. Their discussion hadn't produced especially major changes in their lives, though. Both were swamped with work already, so they'd decided to wait until the final mission succeeded before starting their life together. They simply didn't have time to move into a new home, even if they wanted to.

Bart hadn't told anyone about his relationship with Kaye. He wanted to confide in Aaron, but he was leery of doing so too soon; he didn't want his big brother to think he was drifting around blissfully on cloud nine. Eventually, Bart decided to tell him after Mission 3 finished.

When the test ended, and the brothers were about to part, Bart called Aaron over for a last chat. "Aaron, when you get back, I want to talk about something."

"What is it?" asked Aaron, puzzled.

"It's important."

Seeing Bart's serious expression, Aaron didn't push his little brother to open up. Instead, he nodded resolutely. "Got it. That just

means I have to make it home safe, no matter what.”

“You will. I know it.”

Pride glimmered in Aaron’s eyes. He extended a hand to Bart. “I’ll be counting on you, GUIDO.”

“Uh...”

That was the first time anyone had used Bart’s title. It warmed his heart, making him feel as though he and his brother—a man he looked up to—stood shoulder to shoulder. Ever since Bart was a sickly little boy, Aaron had been there for him. Now he wanted to live up to his elder brother’s expectations.

Bart’s overfull heart threatened to burst, but he kept his cool, replying with the calm required of a ground control officer.

“Understood, Captain. I promise you’ll succeed.” He spoke earnestly, clasping his brother’s hand in his own.

And I’ll fly you to the moon.

On August 10, Arnack’s Rocket Launch Center was set to launch Phoenix, Mission 3’s target drone and lunar probe. That would precede the manned spacecraft Zilant’s launch from the UZSR.

The amber morning sun shone upon the sea, which was swimming with the red and yellow sails of yachts seeking the best view of the upcoming launch. It was still midsummer in New Marseille, with daytime humidity above 70 percent. A few hours before launch time, it was already scorching.

From Mission 3 onward, each spacecraft would receive a call sign. A single shared name—like previous missions’ “Rodina” crafts—would’ve confused communications, since two vessels would be in lunar orbit. Each craft’s name was up to the nation that constructed it.

ANSA and the UK government had Arnack’s citizens name their craft, since the public’s tax money funded its construction. The decision also happened to be a great PR stunt. They eventually arrived at the name “Phoenix,” which one authority said “symbolizes the countless difficulties we’ve overcome and the resurrection of UK spacecraft.”

On the other side of the globe, the UZSR gave naming rights to a member of the space development team, rather than the public. “On its way to the moon, Zilant will soar majestically through the skies, just like its namesake,” predicted one speaker.

It was now a matter of months until the final mission. Many waited in anticipation, fascinated by what was certain to be a historic event. At the same time, the voices rallied in protest were unrelenting. A number of people criticized Arnack’s decision to cooperate with Zirnitra, and protests broke out across the UK. Police in New Marseille were dispatched to keep protesters under control. Elsewhere, unofficial merchandise was produced and sold. Even cults made use of lunar mythology for their own ends. For better or worse, the moon was a hot topic worldwide.

In the moments before Mission 3 began, Mia Toreador and the D Room team waited nervously at the Rocket Launch Center. They’d developed the flight control unit in the rocket tip alongside ACE and sixty other businesses. The unit was built into the guidance computer that would handle Phoenix’s reactions, guiding it into lunar orbit.

At this point, both nations had put spacecraft in lunar orbit. Barring unexpected issues, success was a given.

Once Phoenix took off from the Rocket Launch Center, ground control would shift to the west coast Aeronautical Research Center, which had developed and overseen numerous smooth unmanned flights. The Aeronautical Research Center would also supervise lunar orbit and docking on Mission 4 and the final mission.

Mia spoke on D Room’s behalf to the brown-haired, red-eyed personnel who’d gathered, all of whom had been her colleagues since they toiled in obscurity. “We’ve done everything we can,” she said calmly. “All that’s left is to await the results of our hard work. I don’t doubt Bart and Kaye will carry this off.”

The dhampirs nodded.

“We’re paving the way to a new history. That’s the long and short of it.” Mia turned to the window. Gazing at the rocket in the distance, she stood ready, awaiting the launch.

Phoenix launched right on time. It soared through the clear summer skies, left Earth's orbit, and proceeded smoothly on course to the moon. Three days later, on August 13, it entered lunar orbit on schedule.

Once there, Phoenix snapped high-definition images of the moon's surface to help finalize a landing zone. The lunar module couldn't touch down just anywhere, so Project Soyuz had to take great care in selecting a spot to land. Having considered the current data, the team deemed Mare Tranquillitatis—a flat area near the lunar equator—the most suitable location. Its name meant "Quiet Sea," but Mare Tranquillitatis was an ocean in name only; its flat, dark plains were waterless.

Having chosen Mare Tranquillitatis, Project Soyuz still lacked details on the area's conditions. It was vast, eight hundred and seventy-three kilometers in diameter. The photographs Phoenix would provide following Mission 3 would confirm Mare Tranquillitatis's southwestern corner as the landing zone.

The lunar module would also make use of Phoenix's photographs during descent. The lunar surface lacked the approach lighting system that was standard at landing fields, so the astronauts would need to refer to lunar craters and mountains as landmarks. That made detailed data on the moon's surface even more important.

Once Phoenix took its photographs, Mission 3's crew could move to the next phase: manned rendezvous and docking in lunar orbit.

On August 14, the Albinar Cosmodrome launched Zilant with a crew of three—captain Aaron, lunar module pilot Semyon, and CSM pilot Tomas. Tomas was an ace pilot in the Arnackian Navy, famous for his achievements.

Following launch, ground stations worldwide began to track Zilant's flight, and ground control moved from the Albinar Cosmodrome to New Marseille's Manned Spacecraft Center.

Bart's duties as supervisor of the lunar landing ground control team would now truly begin. Mission 3 wouldn't include a descent, but

Bart was responsible for more than just overseeing the landing. The flight to and from the moon would last over a week, and the ground control teams were working shifts to provide twenty-four-hour coverage throughout the mission.

To prepare for their duties, Bart and Kaye went to the control center at the heart of the Manned Spacecraft Center; the bland, windowless three-story building was key to Project Soyuz. Bart would be stationed in the mission control center on the third floor. The flight control room and main offices were on the second floor, and the first floor housed the computer room.

The pair made their way past the entrance, which was swamped with media and ANSA employees, then through a closely guarded security door. Taking an elevator to the third floor, they walked down a corridor bustling with engineers. Through a glass observation wall, they saw the dimly lit mission control center. Although there was no seat for Kaye inside, she'd attend mission control's final briefing, since her role was vital to the mission.

The mission control center was laid out like a small cinema, with four rows of desks positioned to view the five display monitors at the front of the room. The desks were for the twenty ground control officers, who would each oversee their own console and monitor. All four rows contained hundreds of buttons, switches, and dials that varied according to the officers' core duties. Every desk was a unique mess of mugs, soft drink cans, ashtrays, headsets and phone receivers—not to mention ten-centimeter-thick mission control manuals and binders of additional documents.

Everyone in the mission control center had important work to do, and nerve-racking, sweat-inducing tension filled the air. This would be Bart's first major job, but—although it was unlike anything he'd done—he was no longer nervous. When he'd first been appointed to ground control, Bart lay awake at night, haunted by potential accidents and failures. He'd suffered nightmares when he slept. But as he practiced and studied, he realized not only that his fears wouldn't best him but that he was more than capable of his new job. After that, the nightmares disappeared completely.

Sipping iced coffee to quench his dry throat, Bart looked around. The vast majority of the group was about his age. The world was embarking on one of the most important missions in known history, yet

the ground control officers' average age was thirty-two. For engineers, that dropped to just twenty-eight. Many of those now working in space development had started young, drawn by the wonder and charm of terms like "lunar landing" and "space development." They'd joined ANSA, or companies related to space development, and made it to key positions in major historic missions in just a decade.

What made this ground control team unique was that—since Zilant had been created in the UZSR—roughly half the officers were Zirnitran. The team's first meeting had produced confusion on both sides; technological and philosophical differences even led to arguments. With time, they'd understood each other, and now they could run simulations perfectly.

"Looks like everyone's here," said Flight Director Damon, head of the mission. He stood at the front of the room, commanding everybody's attention. His expression was sterner than usual, and his low, sharp voice exuded military power. "Let's lay out the particulars one last time. Today, Zilant will launch from Zirnitra as scheduled. You'll each perform your duties and guide the vessel to the moon. That should be simple enough. Our real challenge will begin once Zilant enters lunar orbit. First, it'll attempt to rendezvous and dock. Once it succeeds, the crew will transfer to Phoenix to retrieve high-definition photographs of the lunar surface. They'll also test the life-support systems and space suits for surface surveyance. Once they complete those tasks, they'll return to Earth."

Damon then confirmed various key details with the ground control officers. One topic he raised was communicating with Zilant and Phoenix in lunar orbit. Due to the 380,000-kilometer distance, there would be a lag of 1.3 seconds between transmissions. The condition of a craft's antenna could also affect communications. Damon pointed that out because none of them had experienced it in practice. Mission 3 would be their chance to prep for the final mission by getting used to their communications technology.

The computing division would likewise need to confirm things during Mission 3's flight. First and foremost, they had to ensure the newly installed HGC ran smoothly. They'd also have to verify Kaye's revised data. Their success hinged on those two tasks.

Damon studied the ground control team one by one. "All of you gathered today are the very best on Earth. If we're going to make it to

the last mission and truly wage war on the moon, so to speak, we can't see Mission 3 as much more than a preliminary skirmish. Don't be surprised to encounter a situation you didn't experience in the simulations. Whatever we face, we'll work as mission guidelines dictate. Should any of you decide we need to abort the flight, don't hesitate. The crew's lives are our priority, so we'll be making that choice honorably. I'll take responsibility for whatever happens."

The ground control officers' faces hardened as the weight of the moment pressed upon them. As Damon's gaze reached Bart, the young engineer held it with confidence. He and Kaye stood at attention.

Sensing determination in each and every ground control officer, Damon grinned proudly. "We'll spend more than a week in this godforsaken heat, but I don't want any of you collapsing on me. Let's see this flight to victory, then celebrate with beer and zhizni."

Damon looked up at the wall. The ground control team followed his gaze to a faded red flag. It'd been made from rags while Bart was working in D Room, back when people still looked down on computers. Past the flag, far in the distance, was their target: the moon.

Staring intently at the words on the flag—words that were now the engineering team's slogan—Damon exclaimed, "Fly them to the moon!"

"Yes, sir!" The ground control officers replied in unison.

After the team briefing, Kaye headed back downstairs. Bart left the mission control center to accompany her. The first-floor computer room was full of talented ACE engineers, all working on ACE Alpha computers. It would be no exaggeration to call the room Mission 3's linchpin.

There were five computers, including the main mission computer and one on constant standby as a backup. The other three computers had different control and software roles; they processed data like voice transmissions and heart rates. All the data sent by a spacecraft would pass through ground control's station network to the computers. The ACE Alphas would calculate the vessel's location, position, and speed in real time. They'd record that data, compare it to the team's precalculated targets, and process it to display on mission control's monitors. The ground control officers there could access saved data to assess a spacecraft's condition, enabling them to provide the crew with up-to-date data and make the best possible decisions. Meanwhile, the

vessel would constantly send more data.

Throughout this data-gathering and processing loop, Kaye would ensure the HGC's accuracy by handling calculations the ACE Alphas couldn't completely process. She'd use data from the spacecraft as a baseline for complicated high-speed calculations, then input those into the system and send them to mission control.

The office beside the computer room had been rearranged so Kaye could focus and was now an ad hoc "calculation room." A special team consisting of Arnack's best mathematicians and aerospace engineers was also present to support Kaye and liaise between the computer and calculation rooms. A huge amount of responsibility rested on Kaye's shoulders. Bart was capable of ordinary calculations at best, and the extent of the computing Kaye faced would've melted his entire brain. In a sense, he was sending Kaye into a battlefield all her own.

The pair stood a short distance from the calculation room to chat before the mission.

"Feeling good?" Bart asked.

Kaye pumped both fists adorably. "I'll give this fight all I've got!"

"Great. I'll be fighting too!" Bart tapped her fists with his own.

As their hands touched, Kaye winced. "If I make a mistake, you'll be the first to know, won't you?"

That was true. One of Bart's duties was to monitor the spacecraft's computer constantly. If anything went haywire, there'd be two possible causes: an HGC or ACE Alpha error, or Kaye failing to calculate necessary data fast enough. All Bart could do was pray that neither situation occurred. He didn't expect Kaye to falter, but he knew simply telling her that wouldn't calm her down.



He figured a joke was a better way to help her relax. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. You were literally perfect in all the simulations. If I do see anything weird happen, I might even assume *I’m* wrong and look the other way!”

Kaye’s cheeks puffed into a pout, and her fists pushed against Bart’s. “Don’t put that much faith in me! Make the right call!”

Whoops. She took me seriously. Bart chuckled and scratched the back of his head. “Hold up. I’m just joking.”

“Joking?”

“Of course! Making that call, I’d consider every factor.”

“Bart! Don’t scare me like that!”

“Sorry. Seriously, I don’t think you’ll make an error. I really don’t.”

Bart had been at Kaye’s side for many years. Admittedly, she spilled beverages and tripped over her own feet day to day. But when it came to work, she’d never failed, no matter how complicated a calculation or how new a program. Bart’s confidence was entirely untested, yet he knew she’d succeed. Perhaps it was overly optimistic, but he just couldn’t imagine Kaye failing when it counted most.

If Bart was worried about anything, it was Kaye’s physical health. He could easily imagine her pushing herself so hard she broke down. And unlike everyone else participating in Mission 3, Kaye wouldn’t get any particularly long breaks.

Ground control would work in shifts, and the astronauts had dedicated sleeping times—but only because they had access to the computer’s semi-autopilot system. That was an advantage computers had over humans: They didn’t need rest. But Kaye’s job was to *support* the computers. She had breaks, but they were short. At best, she’d squeeze in a short nap. She needed to be on standby at all times, since any hiccups midflight could easily demand a sudden onslaught of recalculations. The stress on Kaye was comparable to the pressure on the astronauts attempting the lunar landing.

Kaye was as aware of that now as she had been when she agreed to take part in the mission. So, although Bart desperately wanted to tell Kaye not to overdo it, he kept his concerns to himself. No words of sympathy would help her here. However hard things got for her, she

never complained, and Bart's job now was to cheer her on as best he could. To that end, he'd prepared a gift.

"I got these for you." Bart pulled a box of planetary cookies from his bag and passed them to Kaye.

The cookies had debuted at the 21st Century Expo. They'd gotten so popular, you could now buy them directly from ANSA. Bart knew Kaye already had a mountain of sweets to help her through Mission 3, but he wanted to give her something himself. The cookies weren't special on their own, but they had sentimental meaning for the pair.

As Kaye saw the cookies, her eyes lit up. "Thank you! I can't wait to eat them!"

"Let's carry out our duties," Bart told her. "Well, I better get going." He'd come check on Kaye during his breaks, of course, but he kept that to himself.

"Wait." Kaye squeezed Bart's right wrist.

"Huh?"

Taking Bart's little finger, Kaye wrapped her own around it. "As long as the moon's up there, let's keep trying to make our dreams come true!"

"Kaye..."

She'd repeated the promise they made at the 21st Century Expo. Back then, they'd pledged a dhampir pinky blood oath, licking blood from one another's little fingers.

"Today, we'll promise the human way," Kaye added shyly.

"We'll make our dream come true."

In the eight years since they'd met, Bart and Kaye had supported each other as both overcame personal difficulties. They'd shouldered demanding Arnack One PR tasks, worked on computers while those around them shunned them, and marched in protest alongside their D Room peers. At the 21st Century Expo, they'd stood up to the esteemed Professor Klaus and persuaded him to recognize the viability of a lunar orbit rendezvous. Then they'd developed programs to guide a spacecraft to the moon. Every problem they faced, they overcame together.

Now they were aiming to achieve their dreams alongside their Zirmitran comrades, and they'd both be on their own. They'd apply their

skills in different areas toward their shared goal, as if rowing separate vessels on a grand voyage across the sea.

Bart and Kaye separated their little fingers and nodded, silently wishing each other the best.

“Come on, let’s do this!” The phrase was like a spell for Bart—magic words he uttered before going into battle.

After launching from Albinar, Zilant’s three-man crew flew into space and entered Earth orbit. As the computer room processed the ground stations’ tracking data, the mission control center’s main display showed the spacecraft’s location and status.

The mission was underway. Ground control officers sat at their desks with their headsets on, reviewing fifteen hundred data points to ensure the safety of Zilant’s crew. Calm voices flew back and forth amidst the constant clatter of keyboards.

Mission control’s first row monitored the spacecraft’s orbit, as well as crucial functions including reaction control and retrorocket systems. On the far right of that row, Bart watched over Zilant’s computer.

The second row consisted of electrical engineers and aerospace medical professionals. It also contained the crew transmissions supervisor, known as the “capsule communicator” or “CAPCOM,” who spoke on behalf of the entire mission control team. The “CAPCOM” role prevented the confusion that could ensue if all the ground control officers tried to speak at once. The role was generally given to multiple astronauts working in shifts.

Damon, the mission control director, sat in the center of the third row. He watched all systems, making decisions based on the ground control team’s reports.

Mission control’s fourth row was made up of parties who weren’t directly connected to executing the mission—for instance, the Secretary of Defense and important representatives of Zirnitra’s National Institute of Science. Beside them sat Jennifer Sellers, a public relations officer from the Office of Public Information at ANSA’s headquarters. She was essentially the face of ANSA. The manned lunar landing would be a

huge scientific achievement and major historic feat, and they needed to explain that in a way that ordinary citizens could digest easily. Jennifer's role on this mission had originally been intended for the PR director, but the UK government was concerned that they had yet to send any women into space, while the UZSR had sent two. In light of that, Jennifer had received this job, and her clear, upbeat explanations detailed the lunar missions for the world.

“This’s Zilant.” Aaron’s voice came through from the vessel’s Earth orbit. *“New Marseille, when you’re ready, we’re prepared for an ignition test.”*

“Roger that,” replied CAPCOM. “We’ll get ready.”

Zilant would orbit Earth one and a half times while its crew inspected the spacecraft and communication system. Data was now being relayed between Earth and space, with messages going back and forth every few seconds.

“This’s New Marseille. We’re ready, Zilant.”

“Roger.”

Ground control officers scrutinized the information on their consoles, reporting the conditions to Damon. If they discovered errors, they’d consult specialists in a control center support room and a group of outside engineers to find a solution. Mia and the rest of D Room were part of the former support team. If those groups found no solution, ground control would suspend the mission—or, in a worst-case scenario, abort it on the spot.

Two hours after launch, Zilant’s crew completed their inspections, finding no problems. That cleared them to begin trans-lunar injection —“TLI”—to reach the moon.

It hadn’t been publicized that Mission 3’s crew produced numerous commemorative autographs before embarking. Those signatures weren’t for the sake of merchandising. Rather, should the crew perish, their families could sell the autographs to support themselves.

Project Soyuz had to avoid that tragic future at all costs. Both countries had poured their best into space development, and they were ready to overcome each and every hurdle. Bart kept that in mind as he monitored the computer.

Damon began calling for each supervising ground control officer's update.

“RETRO.”

“Ready.”

“FIDO.”

“Ready.”

“GUIDO.”

“Ready!” Bart’s reply was noticeably more energetic than those of his fellow officers. He’d meant to stay cool, but his palms were already sweating. Telling himself to relax, he took a few deep breaths and looked back at his monitor.

There’d been no computer issues thus far, which meant the HGC was operating correctly, and Kaye wasn’t struggling with her calculations.

Having confirmed everything, Damon gave CAPCOM his orders. “All systems go. Proceed to TLI.”

CAPCOM relayed that message to Zilant. “This’s New Marseille. Proceed to TLI. Over.”

“Roger. Thanks.”

Before long, Zilant’s crew had prepared the third-stage rocket for reignition. That would let the spacecraft move quickly enough to break free of Earth’s gravity and head toward the moon. Ground control monitored the incoming data as CAPCOM and Zilant continued to communicate.

“Try the uplink with the S-band and VHF this time,” CAPCOM instructed.

“*We got the revised display right on time,*” Aaron confirmed.

Zilant’s crew followed their schedule precisely, and the mission control center tensed as the time for ignition approached. The toneless communications between CAPCOM and the crew continued.

“Less than one minute to ignition. All systems go.”

“Roger. Ignition.”

“Ignition confirmed,” said CAPCOM. “Thrust is good. All clear on trajectory and guidance.”

The third-stage rocket's burn phase would last five minutes. Bart checked his console, praying the HGC would operate correctly and that Kaye's calculations would keep up with it. One success was all they needed for a huge confidence boost.

Three and a half minutes into burn, Zilant soared faster and faster. Like its namesake black dragon, the craft surpassed hypersonic speed with ease.

“This’s New Marseille. No problems here.”

“Roger that. Continuing with burn. This feels amazing.”

“All boosters are nominal. Condition looks good. Over.”

Zilant accelerated to 40,000 kilometers an hour, pulling rapidly away from Earth. TLI had succeeded; the craft was now en route to the moon, and the new data on the monitor was within normal ranges. Relief flooded mission control. Thinking of Kaye on the first floor, Bart clenched his fist and sent her a silent, heartfelt message: *We did it!*

Zilant’s crew had entered a world where day and night no longer existed. On Earth, however, the curtain of night had fallen. New ground control officers were entering the mission control center to replace those finishing their first shifts.

Bart and the others in his row patted each other on the back, heaving long sighs. “One shift over safely,” Bart muttered.

The abrupt release from his sustained state of concentration filled him with a heavy exhaustion. He took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. TLI was complete, and since reaching the moon took a day, there were no dangerous tasks in the immediate future. Mission 3 had entered a period when the astronauts and ground control officers could relax.

Behind the scenes, where human eyes couldn’t pry, computers were operating at all times to ensure functions from life support to flight path confirmation ran optimally. Kaye, meanwhile, would be expected to work at a rate that approached those computers for over a week. Bart knew she wouldn’t collapse on the first day, but he was still concerned.

“I’m getting some fresh air,” he told his team, hurriedly tidying his things before going to check on Kaye.

To avoid getting in anyone’s way, Bart watched the first-floor team’s activities from a distance. In the computer room, ten engineers

were working in front of the ACE Alpha consoles. In the calculation room, past people reading documents and discussing things among themselves, was Kaye. She sat facing the wall, completely still. Bart couldn't see her expression, but he knew she was halfway through a calculation.

After some time, Bart noticed a middle-aged man leaving the calculation room and pulled him aside to ask how Kaye was doing.

"She's been deep into her work since the mission began," the man said with a hint of worry. "She's taken hardly any breaks."

"I thought that'd be the case," Bart muttered.

"She seems to know how to look after herself—when she *does* rest, she's asleep in seconds. At any rate, her abilities are shocking. I'd heard the rumors, but she really is as fast and accurate as a computer."

Relief—and a fair amount of pride—flooded through Bart. His worries had been groundless; Kaye was doing great. He offered his thanks and made to leave when the man flashed a cheeky grin. "She did crazy amounts of work for a while during TLI. She was utterly exhausted. You know what, though? She ate a planetary cookie and perked back up."

"Oh. Is that so?"

"Yup. Says she eats one every time she overcomes a challenge." The man's grin was unrelenting. "She looks forward to them when things get tough, apparently." The man was ribbing him; he must've known Bart gave Kaye the cookies.

Bart was suddenly embarrassed, but he did his best to shrug it off. "Well, I mean...those planetary cookies sure are delicious, right?" Unfortunately, he was a terrible actor. His joy was plain on his face. With a curt nod, he excused himself.

When Bart stepped out of the control center, it was dark. There was no wind or even a hint of a breeze—only oppressive humidity. He looked at the purplish-black night sky and the beautiful constellations that dappled it. Above them hung the moon. Bart raised his pinky to it—the same pinky with which he and Kaye had made their promise.

Bart made another promise then—this time to his brother, Aaron, who was flying through the very sky he gazed at. *All my comrades who share our dream, I promise you...we'll succeed.*

Three days had passed since launch. Everything had gone smoothly so far; the flight path and thrust corrections had gone off without a hitch. There'd been a few minor issues, but those were all easily addressed without requiring help from the support room. The HGC continued to operate without error, and the flight data remained in the planned range.

All that was largely thanks to Kaye's work. Her efforts were almost invisible, but they rippled out to everyone in the mission control center. The team showed their gratitude by bringing snacks and drinks to the calculation room during their breaks.

Despite the high-stress environment on the first day, mission control had settled into a composed, relaxed atmosphere. Bart had gotten used to how things flowed. That being the case, everyone was still concerned about errors and mistakes. Concentration remained high, and the ground control officers stayed glued to their consoles.

Bart was so engrossed in work that he didn't even realize someone had left a cup of coffee at his desk, perhaps in a moment of generosity. By the time Bart actually drank it, the beverage was tepid, but it had been topped up with plenty of milk and sugar. It gave Bart's heart a much-needed jump start.

The crew aboard Zilant sent messages to Earth, sounding jubilant.

“Even in zero gravity, we’re sleeping well. Aside from how cramped it is, this trip through space has been fantastic and tremendously fulfilling,” said Aaron.

“The only issue so far was with the video camera,” Semyon added. *“Imagine the historic tragedy if we’d missed out on recording our courageous faces!”*

Fortunately, the crew had managed to repair the camera’s wiring and film live footage of their trip. Viewers seemed to love it; Jennifer, who was on media duty, was in high spirits.

But while the flight was going smoothly, the mission control center was gradually falling apart. No windows meant no sunlight, and cigarette smoke filled the poorly ventilated room. Trash piled up at the

officers' consoles. Everyone had consumed exorbitant amounts of coffee, and stress levels were high. If the mission had been a month-long affair, health issues would've been inevitable. Regardless, nobody voiced a single complaint. The officers dutifully remained at their consoles, joking and chatting to keep morale high. They did make sure to keep their comments clean and friendly just in case they were being recorded.

As Mission 3 entered its fourth day, the moon came into range. That marked Zilant's next potentially risky task: lunar orbit insertion, commonly referred to as "LOI."

Phoenix, which had launched prior to Zilant, was in lunar orbit already. If Zilant likewise entered lunar orbit successfully, that would move Mission 3 closer to one of its main goals—rendezvous and docking.

Bart quickly downed the last of his now-flat bottle of cola, checking his desk monitor to prepare for LOI.

"Huh?" Something wasn't right. He took a closer look. "How the...?" The data didn't make sense. *Is something wrong with the console? Or is...* Fear hit Bart like a pail of water.

"GUIDO, are you getting weird display data?" asked RETRO—the retrofire officer—who sat next to Bart.

Whispers flew around them. Other officers were reporting the same thing.

Bart racked his brain to figure out what was happening. It wasn't clear what was causing these errors, but the situation wasn't good. The control center's main computer might've hit a snag, and those computers were the brains of the mission. If this wasn't fixed, the team couldn't risk LOI. If worse came to worst, they'd have to abort the whole mission.

"FLIGHT!" Crying out Flight Director Damon's title, Bart made a panicked report, his voice sending worried tremors through mission control.

When Bart finished, Damon's brow furrowed. He looked grim.

“Can we fix it?”

“I’ll check.”

Hands shaking, Bart picked up the phone at his desk and called the computer room. As he’d expected, this was a computer issue; the engineers were in the middle of identifying its cause.

This was bad. They had to find a solution—now.

Is it time to consult the support room? Bart began to stand, then stopped himself. *No, wait. We trained on this exact situation.*

He combed his memories, recalling the steps they took while training. If the main computer failed, they switched to the backup. That was exactly why it was always on standby. The operators updated the flight data every ninety minutes to allow them to make that switch. According to the schedule, they’d saved the newest batch of data ten minutes ago. As long as switching to the backup computer went smoothly, the mission could continue without issue, and the engineers could look into the problem later.

Bart turned to Damon and proposed his solution. “We’ll use our saved data and try switching to the backup computer,” he said confidently.

“Roger. Make it quick.”

Bart called the computer room, requesting the switch. The engineer he spoke to told him to wait a moment, then hung up.

All Bart could do now was trust them and wait. “Come on...”

There was no need to worry. The computer room was full of talented engineers who knew the ACE Alpha much better than Bart did. But even as he told himself that, sweat beaded on his back and concern gripped his heart in a vise.

Zilant was traveling extremely fast, covering thousands of kilometers in minutes. CAPCOM maintained calm as the vessel was prepared for LOI. Bart’s worries and mission control’s fears didn’t reach the crew.

Please. Staring at his desk monitor, Bart prayed the computer room could switch to the backup. He knew he’d made the right decision, that he’d had sufficient knowledge and experience.

Three minutes after he called the computer room, the phone at

Bart's desk rang. He picked up in a flash. "What's your status?"

"The main computer's back up and running," came the smooth reply.

The data on Bart's monitor was also back to normal. "It's fixed! Thank goodness." There wasn't time to soak in the relief. Repressing his joy, Bart gave Damon a succinct report. "The main computer's back. We're clear to continue."

"Copy. Ground control, reconfirm all systems. If systems are go, we'll proceed with LOI."

The ground control officers got to work quickly. Bart allowed himself a small sigh of relief, then redialed the computer room to find out what the problem had been.

According to the lead engineer, the fault was the HGC's accuracy deterioration, which had overwhelmed the main computer. "We'll steer clear of another overload by putting the backup computer to work too. And we'll increase the calculation room's workload."

Bart was taken off guard. "Huh? You're giving Kaye *more* work?"

"We made sure to get her permission first."

"I see. Roger that."

If Kaye was sure she could do it, Bart wouldn't tell her otherwise. She'd clearly determined this was the best course of action. Putting his headset back on, Bart took a deep breath. He was worried about Kaye, but he had his own duties to focus on.

The minor computer emergency had sent a shock wave through mission control, but Zilant was still on schedule as it entered the LOI phase. Its elliptical orbit would have an altitude ranging from 110 to 310 kilometers above the moon's surface. Having come all the way from Earth, Zilant would first need to slow down to enter orbital flight. That would require two precise thrusts, the first on the far side of the moon.

This task was another of Mission 3's challenges. Zilant had traveled 380,000 kilometers, and while radio communication was possible, it came at a 1.3-second lag. Transmissions traveled via a network that allowed for relatively uninterrupted communication. If one ground control station's signal was temporarily interrupted, the network switched to another.

During the approximately fifty minutes when Zilant was on the far

side of the moon, communication would be impossible. The moon itself would block all transmissions, and the HGC would be working independently. The crew would gather what information they needed while communications were up. Then, on the far side of the moon, they'd use DSKY to launch HGC programs in the required order. Since Zilant's HGC had been repurposed from a Hyperion vessel, there was a chance unexpected problems would occur. Fortunately, the HGC had risen to their expectations so far and had yet to produce major errors. No one in the mission control center was sweating bullets.

Seventy-three hours after launch, CAPCOM and Aaron began preparing for the far side of the moon.

“This’s New Marseille. We have flight angle updates. Map updates too. You’ll need to revise yours.”

“Okay. Start with the revisions.”

“Understood. Loss of signal in 054:48:22...”

Zilant’s crew understood what mission control was telling them, but it would be unintelligible to any ordinary citizen. It was Jennifer’s job to translate such messages for media broadcasts. In this case, CAPCOM was telling the crew to make allowances for signal loss time when they reached the far side of the moon, when the spacecraft flew at longitude 150 degrees west, and when communication signals resumed. Zilant’s crew asked mission control to provide further information before they readied themselves for orbital entry.

As Bart listened to the transmissions, he thought of Kaye. All the data going back and forth resulted from her countless recalculations.

“Final preparations for LOI thrust complete,” said Aaron. “Update verb twenty-seven.” Zilant was about to fly behind the moon from the left.

Just before communications cut off, CAPCOM sent Aaron and his crew a last message. “Two minutes to signal loss. From all of us here at mission control, good luck!”

“Thanks a lot. See you on the other side.”

The signal dropped as scheduled, and the ground control team heaved a collective sigh. Until communications came back online, they wouldn’t know Zilant’s condition. Everyone in the room prayed that the ship would keep soaring through space safely, like its namesake

Zirnitran dragon.

Forty-seven minutes later, Zilant was expected to reappear. Mission control received a flood of data but hadn't yet been contacted by the crew.

Ground control waited with bated breath as CAPCOM got on the radio. "This's New Marseille. Requesting status report."

Five seconds later, Aaron replied, "*We're back, New Marseille. Currently in lunar orbit.*"

The mission control center erupted with cheers. The first insertion maneuver had succeeded, and the HGC was still operating. Bart reined in the urge to visit Kaye and celebrate. Instead, he munched one of the planetary cookies he'd bought himself and relished the quiet taste of victory. He had a feeling Kaye was doing the same thing.

Zilant's crew could now observe the moon more closely. They shared what they saw.

"*It's so lonely and desolate,*" Tomas noted, deep emotion in his voice. "*Such a rough, craggy location. There's no hint of life.*"

"*It makes me long for Earth,*" Aaron said, apparently a little homesick. "*The moon's scenery never changes. Quite frankly, it'll get old fast.*"

Over about four hours, Zilant orbited the moon twice, decelerating for its second insertion maneuver and entering elliptical orbit. That marked the LOI procedure's completion. Now that the crew was once again safe for the moment, they inspected Zilant's systems to prep for the next phase—rendezvous and docking with Phoenix.

One of the mission control center's side displays showed footage Zilant had taken of the moon. Seeing the ash-gray lunar surface, Bart was momentarily speechless. It was just like Aaron's crew reported: rocky and charmless. The strange environment seemed unlike anything any of them were used to, and it was being televised around the world. It was sure to surprise all the viewers the same way it had Bart.

Zilant and Phoenix orbited the moon, ever closer to rendezvous and docking. This was Mission 3's most important objective. The final mission's crew would rendezvous and dock twice—first when the craft arrived in lunar orbit, then again after returning from the lunar surface. Mission 3 would simulate the former event.

Zilant's crew would first need to bring their spacecraft in range of Phoenix and decelerate to match the other vessel's speed. The rendezvous would test their skills. Ground control officers updated Aaron's crew as needed, and the crew used those updates to revise their own data.

The mission control center filled with sudden, frenetic energy, and Bart thought of Kaye. Since two spacecraft were involved in this phase, it required more data processing than any other. Mission control also needed to work alongside the Aeronautical Research Center, which was supervising Phoenix. This was easily Mission 3's most difficult phase. None of the remaining missions would demand as much of Kaye, since she wouldn't do any calculations for the lunar module.

If they overcame this challenge, they'd be that much closer to the moon. Not wanting Kaye's efforts to go to waste, Bart focused on his own responsibilities. That was the best he could do as a member of the most elite team on Earth—carry out his duties and support Zilant's crew.

As Zilant orbited the moon, the people of Earth were glued to their televisions. Most viewers were completely unaware of mission control or Kaye, and perhaps they simply weren't interested in what happened behind the scenes.

That didn't matter to anyone in the control center. They did their work because they loved it, not for praise or recognition. They didn't need attention—in fact, they didn't *want* it. Attention only indicated something had gone wrong, since major accidents and malfunctions drew the public eye. If the team couldn't solve a problem, the results were often tragic, and they had to search for the cause. On the other hand, when mission control *did* avert a crisis, they became laudable heroes.

Mission control's goal was to prevent major issues from derailing a mission, and everyone on the ground strove to ensure the highest trust in their spacecraft. Hundreds of thousands of people had worked many long years to ensure crew safety and security. They'd developed, built, and refined the vessels through failure and sacrifice.

Thus, the general public's blissful unawareness of mission control was the best-case scenario. They could keep their eyes on the stars where astronauts showcased the best science had to offer.

Looking at the flight status on his monitor, Bart said a silent

prayer. *I led you to the moon, Aaron, just as I promised. Now it's up to you.*

"Entering verb thirty-seven, noun fifty-one," Tomas reported.

"Roger," replied CAPCOM.

That exchange confirmed the rendezvous program. This stage would take both vessels to the far side of the moon and back.

Zilant chased after Phoenix, the moon their backdrop. Using the lunar surface as a point of reference was an innovative way to maintain a sense of perspective—something very easy to lose track of in space's vast darkness. Meanwhile, the team used data accumulated up to this point to calculate lunar gravity's effect on the flight.

Bart confirmed that the HGC was functioning smoothly. *So far, so good.*

Zilant bridged the distance to Phoenix slowly and cautiously until it held a position directly behind the latter craft. Rendezvous had been achieved.

Now the crew moved on to the difficult task of docking. They donned their space suits as a precaution, since a collision could cause the vessel's interior pressure to drop.

Damon confirmed Zilant's status with each ground control officer.

"RETRO."

"Conditions normal."

"GUIDO."

"HGC and DSKY normal." Bart felt strangely calm, his mind cool and rational. Although he wondered how things were in the calculation room, he knew Kaye was fine—the flight was proceeding on schedule, and he hadn't noticed errors or abnormal data.

After the necessary confirmations, Damon turned to CAPCOM. "Proceed with docking."

CAPCOM relayed the order. "Zilant, you're clear to dock."

Zilant slowly approached Phoenix.

"Starting rendezvous radar," Tomas said as he operated DSKY. *"Entering verb forty-four. Complete. Verb forty-eight. Verb twenty-one...?"*

"Verb twenty-one confirmed," Aaron reported.

"Entering verb twenty-one," Tomas said.

The three astronauts voiced every action, updating one another on Zilant's status. Bart listened as he operated his console, bringing up the necessary data on his display. This wasn't a simulation; there'd be no second chances. If they failed here, they would abandon Phoenix and return to Earth defeated.

"I can't see the target clearly," Aaron said.

There was no way to show Zilant's crew footage from outside the spacecraft, so Aaron's team had to use communications and data to visualize what was happening. Aaron kept Phoenix in sight using a monocular attached to a porthole. The gadget wasn't easy to use; it was capable of magnifying a view twenty-eight times, but that gave it the same narrow field of vision as a sniper rifle.

Bart could do little more than listen. Still, he believed in his brother.

"Let's get a bit closer," Aaron directed.

"Bearing is good," Semyon said. *"Forward a little more. Steady on. To the right."*

The three crew members worked together, creeping closer and closer to Phoenix. CAPCOM didn't interrupt, leaving the task in the astronauts' hands.

"How's this?" Semyon's voice was lively. *"Confirm: It's inside?"*

"Affirmative. I see it," Aaron replied. *"We're good."*

The mission control center held its breath. Everyone was on the edge of their seats.

"That's it! How about now?!" Semyon demanded, excited.

"We've got it!" Tomas said.

Aaron followed up with an ecstatic announcement: *"That's the signal we were waiting for! Success!"*

Docking was complete.

"We did it!" Bart thrust his fist skyward.

Cheers and applause rose up throughout the room. Even the people standing behind the windows joined in.

"Great work!" CAPCOM grinned. *"A masterful display of skill!"*

"When I get back, I might make it as a sniper," Aaron joked. Then he

said more seriously, “*We’re grateful to all of you helping us from Earth.*”

Those words made Bart feel like everything he’d undergone to reach this point was worthwhile. He knew Aaron wasn’t just speaking to mission control—he was addressing *everyone* who’d had a hand in development.

Having accomplished the toughest aspect of Mission 3, mission control conducted another shift change. This time, Bart didn’t go to the calculation room. He wanted to visit Kaye, but the mission was far from over, so he decided to wait until he’d seen his responsibilities through to the end.

Reflecting on the mission up to this point, he muttered, “Maybe I’ve been too eager.”

Bart sipped his coffee and mulled it all over. He hadn’t made any mistakes yet, but he was always glued to his monitor, barely registering what went on around him. He was still desperate to keep up with the flow of data, but he now realized he also wanted to enjoy what was set to be a historic moment.

After docking, Zilant’s crew got some sleep, then moved to Mission 3’s next phase. Everything now rested largely on their shoulders. Aaron reported that all the astronauts were suffering some degree of space sickness, but it was bearable.

The first step was to board Phoenix. Tomas, the pilot, stayed at the controls while Aaron and Semyon opened the docking hatch in Zilant’s tip. Then they entered Phoenix. Once inside, they retrieved the high-definition photographs of the lunar surface and promoted international cooperation.

This phase was also a chance for the crew to test their new space suits outside Zilant. Up until now, space suits had been connected to spacecraft with a cord that also supplied their oxygen. The cord had proven to be a hindrance curtailing the crew’s ability to work, so engineers had developed an upgrade with a standalone life-support system allowing the astronauts much more freedom.

The crew member testing the space suit was none other than the

first man to spacewalk: Semyon Adamov.

“A little space sickness isn’t going to stop me from swimming above the moon.”

Semyon battled headaches and nausea for thirty-eight minutes outside Zilant. Now they knew they could board Phoenix externally if the interior docking hatch wouldn’t open.

Semyon’s successful spacewalk marked the completion of all Mission 3’s objectives, leaving only the last phase: TEI, or trans-Earth injection. That was a precise engine thrust that would send Zilant out of lunar orbit onto its route home. It wouldn’t be an issue as long as the crew and computer worked together.

When it was finally time to leave, Zilant jettisoned the now-unnecessary Phoenix—the symbol of the UK’s resurrected space program—into eternal orbit around the sun.

“Desolate moon, we’ll meet again,” were Aaron’s parting words.

Eight days after launch, Zilant returned to Earth and successfully reentered the atmosphere. Bart was on standby when it landed in the sea as intended a few minutes later. He knew rescue teams would find Zilant easily—it was a beautiful day, and visibility was excellent.

Bart pushed against the flood of people rushing into the mission control center to celebrate, heading for Kaye’s calculation room. He was worried about her, but he also wanted to celebrate as a pair now that the HGC had achieved everything asked of it.

When he reached the calculation room, the engineers were chatting outside. He looked around for Kaye, but she was nowhere to be seen. *Where’d she go?*

Just as he was about to ask someone, he heard a voice behind him. “Bart...?”

Bart whirled to see Kaye walking toward him on shaky legs. “Kaye!” He ran over.

“We did it...” Smiling, she collapsed into his arms.

He laid her gently on the floor. “Are you okay?!”

“Sorry. I just had a sudden dizzy spell.” Kaye’s body was cold, and there were bruises on the underside of her arm.

What are those? Bart wondered. *There’s no way she bit herself like last time.*

An engineer came to her side, looking worried. “Is everything okay?”

Quickly, Bart hid the marks on Kaye’s arm. “She’s not in good shape. I’m taking her to the infirmary. Kaye, can you stand?”

She nodded, slowly standing upright with Bart as her support.

The infirmary was a short walk from the control center. There, Bart set Kaye down on a sickbed and sat on a stool beside her. Bright rays of sunlight streamed through the curtains. The room was empty aside from a lone, elderly doctor since the rest of the medical staff had already headed to the mission control room to celebrate.

According to the doctor, Kaye had visited the infirmary during the second half of the mission for an intravenous drip. That was why her arm was bruised.

“Kaye...” Bart mumbled. “Was it really that hard on you?”

Panicked, Kaye played it down right away. “Don’t get the wrong idea! It’s not like I had to be carried here or something. I asked for the IV myself as a safeguard.”

“Safeguard?”

“Look at it this way—an IV’s superefficient. I got all the nutrients I needed while I slept!”

Though Kaye spoke the words as if they made all the sense in the world, Bart was shocked. He turned to the doctor, who shrugged in defeat. Clearly she’d twisted his arm to get her way. The doctor told Kaye to rest, then promptly left to join the celebrations.

Bart felt an IV drip was excessive, but if Kaye had really deemed it necessary, he wasn’t about to argue with her. “If it was part of the reason we succeeded, I guess that drip was a good idea in the end. Still, I don’t like it when you push yourself too hard. What’s the point if your body pays the price and breaks down?”

“Sorry.” Kaye chuckled. “I did get lightheaded at the very end of the mission. I caused the rest of the team some trouble. But I can be

more careful now that I've pitched in on a full trip to the moon. This won't happen again—I just have to get more exercise."

Kaye flexed her biceps, showing off the bruises on her pale skin. She was right; these missions required her to be in good shape. The next two would last even longer, since they'd include lunar module release and descent. There was also the lunar landing and moon surveyance to factor in.

"I'll exercise with you," Bart said. "I'm exhausted after this mission too."

"No wonder. You were so focused."

Bart was confused. Kaye sounded as though she'd been with him in the mission control center. "Huh?"

She bashfully scratched the back of her head. "During a break, I visited mission control and watched you through the windows."

"Really?"

"I didn't have much time, and your desk was one of the farthest away. You were glued to your monitor the whole time. All I saw was the back of your head."

That sent Bart into a fluster. He hadn't even noticed her. Had he done anything stupid or weird? With his thoughts scrambled, he could barely look Kaye in the eye.

"I was in awe of you," she added, which perplexed Bart all over again.

"Huh?"

Her cheeks flushed. "It's always the other way around, you know—I'm working, and you're by my side. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you, but I decided it was better not to disturb you when you were so focused."

"Ah, okay," Bart said. "You know what? I thought the same thing. That's why I only visited the calculation room once."

"I really wanted to thank you for those cookies, though. I asked a ground control officer to bring you a coffee with sugar and milk." Kaye playfully poked out her tongue. "Did you drink it?"

"Whoa. That was you!?" Bart thought back to the tepid coffee he'd discovered on his desk. "I just figured someone on the team made a pot

for everyone.”

Kaye flashed a satisfied grin. “All according to plan. Wait! Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. Then I could’ve done it again!” She pouted, frustrated, then burst into laughter.

As he and Kaye discussed Mission 3, Bart was relieved to see color return to her face. Aside from the computer error, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Kaye beamed with pride when Bart told her Aaron had thanked the whole team.

“Oh, and I guess they never needed to use the error correction program we installed on the HGC,” said Bart. The error correction program protected the crew in the event of input errors.

Kaye nodded. “That’s Aaron for you.”

“Part of me kind of wanted it to come in handy, since installing it meant we were kidnapped by the Delivery Crew. Still, it’s really for the best that it was never used.” The virtually forgotten program had served more as a good luck charm.

“I totally agree.” Kaye then changed the subject. “Hey, Bart, why not go celebrate with the rest of the team?”

Bart knew she was just being considerate. It was her nature. “Yeah. I mean, I guess I could.”

“Then go! I’ll stay here. I don’t want to fall on anyone and spoil the moment.”

“Hey, just wondering... Why weren’t you in the calculation room when I came down to find you?”

Kaye gripped her blanket, suddenly looking shy and embarrassed. “I went to the mission control center to look for you.” Hiding under the blanket, she poked out a hand, waving Bart away. “Now go! Celebrate.”

“Hmm, I don’t know.” Bart couldn’t stand leaving Kaye behind, but he wondered whether he should let her rest. He was still waffling when they heard applause and party poppers outside.

“Who’s that?” Wondering whether the celebration had spilled outside the mission control room, Bart opened the curtains. A faded piece of red fabric billowed in the air. “Is that... It is! Kaye, look!”

“What?” Kaye peeked from beneath her blanket. Eyes wide, she cried, “Is everyone here?!”

Outside, the ground control team waved a flag—D Room’s flag, emblazoned with the slogan FLY YOU TO THE MOON. Damon was clapping. With him were the other control center staff, many holding beer or zhizni. Even Mia and D Room’s personnel were there. Jennifer had dragged a camera crew along to film the celebration. Even the doctor who’d checked Kaye mere moments earlier was now carousing with the rest of them.

Bart threw open the window. Cicada cries coalesced with the whistles and claps echoing through the building. Damon beckoned Bart and Kaye to come into the hall.

“What do we do?” Bart asked. “They aren’t going anywhere without us.”

“If you’re going, I’m going too,” Kaye declared.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I feel much better! I can always come back if I need to.”

“All right, then. Let’s go.”

With that, Bart and Kaye headed out. They were met with a wave of cheers. The ground control team quickly dragged Bart away and showered him with beer. Damon raised an eyebrow as silently apologizing for the mess. Then Mia jabbed Bart firmly in the ribs.

“Ow! What the—?!”

Mia glanced at Kaye, then looked back at Bart. Her expression said it all: *What’ve you two been up to?*

Ground control turned their sights on Kaye, drenching her with water and beer too. Bart jumped in to rescue her. He didn’t think it was a good idea for her to drink so soon.

“Wait, guys! Kaye was just—”

Before he could say another word, Kaye sprayed *him* with a beer can, shouting, “Congratulations, Bart!”

“Kaye?!” he sputtered.

The dhampir laughed like she was having the time of her life, and ground control chanted “GUIDO! GUIDO!” They jostled Bart until they knocked his glasses from his face.

“My glasses!” Bart cried just as Kaye crunched them underfoot.

“Sorry!”

Bart wondered how many pairs of glasses he'd sacrificed for the sake of space development. At the same time, he was glad *those* had broken and not the spacecraft or a computer. The heat soon had Bart covered in sweat, but he felt better than ever.

Meanwhile, Jennifer was giving an impassioned speech to the camera. “Most of you watching at home think a crew of astronauts just flew through space and reached the moon. You’re right, of course, but also wrong. Ensuring those astronauts arrived safely was an admirable and very difficult task. For the record, hundreds of thousands of people gave their blood, sweat, and tears to be sure our crew would make it home. The historic lunar landing will entail two more missions. As you mark each crew’s success, make sure you also celebrate the engineers and scientists who made their flights possible.”

Jennifer waved a hand, and the news crew’s cameras pivoted to Bart and Kaye. The pair looked at each other for a moment, uncertain.

Damon patted both their shoulders, then pushed them toward the cameras. “Arnack One hasn’t been disbanded yet. Get to it!”

Someone gave Bart D Room’s flag. Kaye stood next to him. Bart knew he’d never get used to the PR side of things. Still, he was proud of their achievement. He stood tall alongside Kaye, puffed out his chest, and declared to the world, “We’ll fly our astronauts to the moon!”

Bart waved D Room’s flag high, as if sending their dreams through the clear blue sky out to space.

Chapter 8: The Road to the Lunar Landing

Indigo Eyes

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NEW MARSEILLE'S scorching temperatures didn't let up even as September rolled in. Heat haze shimmered over the asphalt as the crews for the last two missions boarded a bus for the Rocket Launch Center. Rather than heading off to launch, they were going to the final lunar module inspection.

All the cosmonauts and astronauts were excited and motivated, studying and reviewing their duties even in transit. Following Mission 3's success, they had great momentum. Phoenix's photographs of the lunar surface had been publicized worldwide, East and West were on a path to reconciliation, and the lunar landing was a step closer. The world had nothing but high hopes for Project Soyuz.

During Mission 3, Lev and Irina had dropped by the mission control center and watched from the observation area. Lev wanted nothing more than to stay for the whole mission, but his training schedule didn't allow for that. He caught up on the rest later through communications records and flight data.

Although Lev and Irina had left the engineers alone to concentrate on their work, they'd spotted Bart and Kaye during their visit. The pair were special to the two cosmonauts. Upon meeting them at the 21st Century Expo years earlier, Lev and Irina had sensed that a cooperative lunar landing would be possible with passionate dreamers like Bart and Kaye in Arnack. And it was thanks to Bart and Kaye challenging Professor Klaus that a lunar orbit rendezvous got the go-ahead. If Arnack had proceeded with its planned Earth orbit rendezvous, the lunar module they were now leaving to inspect wouldn't exist. Neither would Project Soyuz.

Lev sometimes saw Bart and Kaye at meetings, but they never had an opportunity to chat; they were all busy working in different locations. Nevertheless, he and Irina wanted to make time to talk with the two engineers before the final mission. Assuming Mission 4

succeeded in October, every department in the mission control center and cosmodrome would participate as Project Soyuz conducted its last simulation. Once that finished, Lev would invite Bart and Kaye to dinner.

Well, that was his plan anyway. Lev wasn't actually certain there'd be time to relax and chat. From the moment he and Irina had returned, they'd trained endlessly. Every cosmonaut had a personal program to follow seven hours a day, and outside of that, they had to review piloting procedures and flight plans with their teams. During meals, they discussed the mission or read their manuals. They also had to stay in good shape to be ready for the trip to the moon and back. Factoring in media obligations, trips to distant facilities, and other tasks, Lev often felt there wasn't enough time in a day.

He didn't just have to maintain his piloting skills. He also had to remember how their craft was constructed and how it worked. The vessel was 99 percent trustworthy, but it was comprised of millions of parts. There were bound to be a few defects, and a single broken part could cause a huge accident. There were no engineers on hand in space; if problems arose, the crew would have to address them. Preparations in that area were the reason Mission 3's crew were capable of fixing the issue that threatened their live broadcast.

Learning about their computer was like climbing a mountain. DSKY input was simple enough, since a manual laid out the order to run the programs in, but reaching the moon would require more than robotically punching in commands. The ship and control center communicated constantly, updating and revising data. During their mission, the crew would input around eight hundred DSKY commands total—more than nine hundred including potential HGC adjustments. That wasn't easy work, but Aaron's crew had performed it without a single error, and their excellence set the bar for subsequent missions.

The closer the moon's surface got, the more there was to remember and the harder things became. Lev's schedule was so packed, he could hardly catch his breath.

Still, it wasn't their hectic schedule or countless duties he took issue with—it was the disrespectful media. The UZSR set strict press rules, but in the UK, impromptu interviews were common. The final mission's three crew members were a hot topic, so reporters were insistent on getting comments. A press group had once completely

thwarted Lev's attempt to do field work to prep for lunar surveyance.

Lev was more than willing to play his part in press coverage, but he wanted to focus on training. He wasn't alone—Irina and Nathan were also fed up with overenthusiastic reporters. ANSA kept their interviews to a bare minimum, but the crew had media obligations to stick to.

Regardless of how tired Lev was or how hard preparations became, he never hated training. He was constantly learning new skills and expanding his knowledge. He didn't want to dial his workload back, go on vacation, play around, or party—he wanted to put what free time he had toward memorizing lunar craters. The moon and outer space filled his heart and mind. As far as Lev was concerned, Project Soyuz was his entire life.

Irina felt the same. After she and Lev shared their feelings in Anival, she demolished the walls she'd put up for so long. When they left her castle, she'd taken some ivy along, later fashioning it into a keepsake for Lev. "It's a traditional good luck charm," she'd explained.

Once they'd returned to Arnack, Irina threw herself into training. Even the heat of the sun—her natural enemy—no longer stymied her. She ate shaved ice several times a day to overcome the sweltering weather.

Lev glanced at Irina. She was studying in the seat beside him, engrossed in a computer manual. She'd scribbled notes inside the book, and her bubbly handwriting was exactly as it had been back when she was just a test subject.

Irina noticed his gaze. "What're you staring at?"

"I was just thinking that your handwriting hasn't changed a bit."

"Your dumb grin hasn't changed either," she replied cheekily.

"Oh, was I grinning?"

She giggled, looking back at her book. Careful not to distract her further, Lev returned to his own studying.

Reaching the Rocket Launch Center, the crews donned hats and lab coats, then entered the dustproof room that housed the lunar module. They began inspecting it immediately.

"*This contraption's going to land you on the moon?*" Irina gawked at the module like some uncanny oddity.

“Yeah. It’s certainly unique, isn’t it?”

Lev examined the strangely shaped lunar module from every conceivable angle. With its four folded legs and antennae poking from the angular main chamber, the module looked like a spider. It stood seven meters tall and, with its legs extended, was nine meters long.

The module consisted of two sections: the ascent stage and descent stage. Lev and Nathan would pilot the former. Its chamber was equipped with a console and data instruments, as well as a radio, HGC, takeoff engine, and reaction-control equipment. To lighten the module as much as possible, the walls were extremely thin. Some sections were so flimsy, Lev thought the slightest shock might tear them open.

The descent stage was an octagonal box with a power supply, an engine to facilitate the landing, and legs to support the module. Its exterior, which was covered in heat-resistant material, sparkled gold. When Lev and Nathan left the moon, the descent stage would be their launchpad. Only the ascent stage would return to the CSM.

When the crews completed their inspection, the lunar module’s legs folded into the craft, and it was inserted into a spacecraft lunar module adapter, or SLA. The SLA would be the first point of contact; it’d play the same role Phoenix had on Mission 3. They’d be launching the SLA into space, and the astronauts would use it for their initial rendezvous and docking procedure. After docking, they’d pull the lunar module from the SLA. At that point, the crew’s first job would be to ensure it wasn’t damaged. They’d also have to confirm that the lunar module’s four legs could unfold. That would be Irina’s job aboard the CSM.

Irina and her backup, Odette, carefully observed and photographed the lunar module’s legs, which ended in circular footpads and contained sensor probes to detect when the module touched the surface. A ladder for lunar descent was attached to a front leg, in addition to various surveyance tools.

As Irina went about her inspection, Lev closed his eyes and pictured the lunar module landing. The vessel was incapable of flight on Earth, being designed purely for outer space. That was why Lev trained in the helicopter-like Lunar Landing Research Vehicle. He was getting used to the dangerous machine now that he’d flown it several times, though nobody knew how good a substitute the vehicle was for the real lunar module. Some ANSA personnel wondered whether it was worth

risking crew members' lives in such an unpredictable craft, but there was no way around it.

Mission 4 would gather lunar module flight data at 15,000 meters above the lunar surface. They couldn't practice an actual lunar descent or landing, and lunar gravity's effects had only ever been calculated on paper. The biggest problem was that, if the lunar module wouldn't fly properly during Mission 4, it would bring the whole endeavor to a screeching halt. If they couldn't control it, the module was no more than a space coffin.

When a member of the mission crew raised that concern, the lead developer insisted, "You'll be fine. We're certain the module will fly. Beyond that, it'll come down to the pilot's skill." The developer had turned to Lev and added confidently, "Rest easy. The module *will* take off from the lunar surface."

Lev had nodded at that, his face resolute. "I believe in you."

Yet they couldn't test the engine during takeoff because it was prone to erosion. They didn't know whether it would perform as expected during the mission. That was terrifying.

A different seed of doubt had taken root in Lev's heart. The actual conditions in Mare Tranquillitatis, their prospective landing zone, were a final challenge nobody on Earth could judge. They had high-definition images, and surveillance photography had enabled them to recognize large craters and mountains. Aaron had reported also that the location seemed suitable.

That being said, the closest they'd gotten was 15,000 meters. They still didn't know the exact surface conditions or how rocky or uneven the area might be. Lev would have to confirm that himself during descent. The lunar module would descend automatically following preset coordinates, and the autopilot program couldn't be adjusted in real time. If landing didn't seem viable, it would be up to Lev to take control and find a safe location.

The HGC autopilot also wasn't guaranteed to take them to the correct coordinates flawlessly. The lunar surface was largely unknown, and its uneven gravity might throw off the flight plan or descent time. Lev had to memorize as much of Mare Tranquillitatis as possible to make judgments in the event of an error. If they confirmed such an error, manual controls would engage, and Lev would need to land the module with HGC support. He wouldn't have time to reference a map,

and they'd be working with limited fuel.

If Lev failed, the greatest show in world history—watched across the globe—would end in tragedy. The mission's success ultimately rested on the captain's shoulders. Lev would need impeccable skills, quick wits, sound judgment, and guts.

He wasn't going to be alone—Nathan would be with him the whole way. The older man would monitor the module's altitude, velocity, and fuel level, as well as the HGC. It'd be his job to relay that data to Lev, who couldn't easily confirm it while landing.

Nathan patted Lev's shoulder as they inspected the module. “How about it, Captain Lev? Confident?”

“I'm 99.9999 percent confident.”

“And the last .0001 percent?”

“That's the risk *you'll* make a mistake.”

Nathan chuckled. “Well, there's no such thing as perfect in this world of ours. Even the best baseball players mess up.”

Lev and Nathan were constantly together. Their training schedules differed according to their responsibilities on the mission, but the pair spent hours in the cramped confines of the lunar module simulator. They'd become good friends, fond of ribbing one another and having casual chats.

Irina, meanwhile, spent most of her training time in the CSM mission simulator. Her main responsibility would be rendezvousing and docking with the lunar module. The checklist for that procedure was hard to comprehend; it was full of complicated technical terminology. Irina would also handle the rocket engine thrusts while entering lunar orbit. The computer would calculate exact data, such as timing, but ignition would be manual. Failure could mean death for them all.

Though her official role was as pilot, Irina was also responsible for things like orbit correction, and she had to be ready to troubleshoot each task she took on. If the docking apparatus didn't release the lunar module automatically, for example, it would be her job to use her tools and release it manually. She'd have lots chores to handle too. While Lev and Nathan prepared for lunar descent, she'd prepare meals, check consumables, and ready the spacecraft's live broadcast.

Though the three mostly focused on individual training, they also

practiced as a crew, using the CSM mission simulator for emergency drills. Now that they had more experience, Lev and Irina understood that the “fire” Nathan had faced them with on their first day was a generous welcome. The engineers supervising their simulations were merciless; the crew had to be ready for anything. Gas explosions midflight, collisions with the lunar surface due to loss of control, errors that sailed them through the vast reaches of space with no hope of slowing down—the crew perished so often in the simulator, it began to wear on them.

“Quit putting us in a faulty ship,” Nathan spat after one training session. He’d grown sick of it.

Yet there were no shortcuts to the lunar surface. To survive, they’d have to hammer the procedures into their bodies and minds. They studied and trained every single day, building their baseline knowledge and experience. The final mission’s three crew members were a team working in harmony.

Lev wanted to support Irina as much as he could during the mission, but that would simply be impossible at times. She’d be alone once he and Nathan were in the lunar module. The CSM’s orbital flight would continue, and every two hours, communications would drop as Irina passed the far side of the moon. If anything happened then, she’d have to handle it alone. She’d also rendezvous and dock solo when Lev and Nathan returned from the lunar surface.

Nathan had once voiced concern about that, but Irina responded with confidence. “I won’t get in your way. I’ll learn everything I have to and outdo myself. Anyway, you and Lev should focus on the landing. If you fail halfway through and come back with your tails between your legs, don’t expect me to let you in.”

Lev was used to Irina’s cutting demeanor, but Nathan wasn’t. He was stunned by it at first, but Irina’s progress boosted their confidence dramatically.

“With a little more polish, she’ll be more than ready for the final mission,” said Odette, who was always with her. Odette had noticed something else about the vampire, and she couldn’t help asking Lev about it. “Irina’s been incredibly focused ever since she returned from Zirnitra. It’s like she awakened to her true power—she’s absorbing *everything*. Did something at home change her? I asked her myself, but she won’t tell me anything.”

It had to have been Anival, but Lev wasn't about to share what had happened. "I think she just got used to the pace here at ANSA, right?"

"Do you?" asked Odette, not entirely convinced.

Lev had noticed the change in Irina too. She'd always thrown herself into things wholeheartedly, but she was especially relentless now.

He remembered how sorrowful she looked when the villagers saw her off at the end of their visit to Anival. "I can't fail," she'd told him. "If I'm the reason we don't land on the moon, or the reason a crew member dies, the villagers will never be able to leave again. It might even cost them their lives."

Her people would either be shunned for eternity, going down in history as a cursed species, or—as Irina desired—take a step toward becoming "Earthlings." It depended on her actions and the final mission's results.

The lunar module inspection ended without incident, and everyone headed off for specialized training. Irina and Odette had a session in the CSM mission simulator, Lev and Nathan were doing lunar surveyance training, and Mission 4's crew had a flight to prepare for.

Before they parted, Lev called out to Irina and quietly explained Odette's question.

Irina glared suspiciously. "You didn't tell her what happened at the castle, did you?"

"Of course I didn't."

Irina drinking his blood wasn't a *crime*, but it was difficult to talk about; it felt taboo. They'd left the castle and returned to the village that same night, and the bloodstains on Lev's shirt had drawn suspicious looks from the villagers. He told them he'd stumbled in the dark and fallen. When he showed them his injured mouth, they seemed to believe him—although Anyuta, who'd raised Irina, knew better.

No stories would leak from a location as isolated as Anival, but if the UK media *did* get wind of the episode, it'd make headlines. Although Lev liked Arnack's free press, he still wasn't good at handling local journalists—probably because he really never had to back home.

How would the different nations of the world report their historic

lunar landing? Lev mulled that over until Irina poked his ribs. “Hey. What’re you thinking about?”

“Hm?”

“You weren’t thinking about the castle, were you?”

“I won’t say I *wasn’t*.”

Irina’s ears reddened. “Just like they say in Zirnitra, ‘It never happened.’” She pouted. “Got it?”

Lev chuckled. “Understood.” His tongue swept over the scar on his bottom lip.

“Hey, you two!” Odette shouted. Their whispering had piqued her curiosity, and she ran over. “What’re you talking about?”

“Training,” Lev and Irina replied in tandem.

Their perfect timing seemed to convince her. “Fantastic! That’s what we’re all off to do! Let’s go to the simulator, Irina!”

“Sounds good. See you, Lev.”

“Good luck.”

Waving goodbye, Lev prepared to leave for his own lunar surveyance training. As he did, he was again struck by the fact that Irina wouldn’t descend to the moon’s surface. There was nothing they could do about that, since everything was set in stone. Lev understood that Project Soyuz was a binational political agreement as much as it was a scientific endeavor. Still, he had to fight the urge to look back at her; he couldn’t get rid of the complicated feelings that fettered his heart.

The Manned Spacecraft Center had a facility for lunar exploration training—a plaster reconstruction of photos of the planned landing zone, outfitted with a replica lunar module. Since this facility couldn’t approximate lunar gravity, Lev and Nathan didn’t practice moonwalking here. That would take place at a facility where cranes simulated the moon’s gravitational conditions. They also walked along the “vomit comet’s” walls, bravely enduring the ensuing space sickness.

Compared to how much time they spent in simulators, Lev and Nathan didn't practice extensively for the lunar surface; those preparations made up about 10 percent of their total training time. Project Soyuz's overall goal was a lunar landing, so exploration and surveyance weren't high priorities.

As ANSA staff and researchers watched, Lev and Nathan donned space suits developed specifically for lunar exploration. They had to work together, since the suits were much trickier to put on than previous designs. First, they donned water-cooled undersuits containing hundreds of plastic tubes to help them withstand the sun's heat, which would exceed a hundred degrees Celsius. Atop those, they wore twenty-layered space suits, helmets, gloves, and boots. Those alone made movement a chore. On their backs, they also carried life-support systems the size of their torsos. The systems weighed about ninety kilograms; they were only bearable thanks to lunar gravity.

The space suits were suffocating. They barely gave the men's joints room to move. The gloves were unwieldy, and every single movement required strength. Training here was acclimatizing them to using tools while wearing their suits. When they first started, Lev had tried to pick up a hammer and fallen over. Unable to get up, he'd wriggled on the floor, drenched in sweat.

"This is so incredibly difficult," he muttered, sighing.

Nathan looked defeated. "If we don't wear them, we don't survive."

It wasn't just the hot sunlight that would be relentlessly cruel—night would drop to negative one hundred and fifty degrees. Then there were harmful ultraviolet rays and micrometeoroids to watch out for. In a sense, the space suits were armor that was completely unnecessary on Earth. It all made Lev realize they were traveling to a truly alien world.

When he and Nathan had their space suits on, they began training. ANSA staff in the next room over would watch over monitors while issuing orders. "Begin landing practice!" one called.

Battling his heavy, clumsy space suit, Lev headed toward the lunar module replica. He'd descend by ladder during the actual flight, but for now, he started on one of the module's front footpads. Turning on the module's built-in video camera, he filmed his first steps on the plaster "lunar surface."

Lev began by describing the landscape before him. “The lunar surface is made up of fine particles.”

Lifting his boot from the footpad, he lowered it down to the surface. He wasn’t going to mention it now, but he felt immense pressure when he imagined his first step on the moon and the words that would follow. ANSA had received an influx of letters containing requests and suggestions from around the world. Everybody from reporters to Project Soyuz personnel was beyond curious about Lev’s upcoming statement, but he still hadn’t decided. Perhaps he wouldn’t until he was there in the moment.

He’d wondered whether ANSA’s PR division would pressure him, but Jennifer didn’t expect that. According to her, neither government was too concerned about his first words. “Both countries understand that they’ll commemorate your achievement via mementos on the lunar surface and a celebratory parade upon your return.”

Lev knew the Zirnitran playbook. Putting up a cooperative front and manipulating the situation from behind the scenes was a classic strategy. There was also the NWO to worry about, so he stayed wary.

Stepping onto the plaster lunar surface, Lev took some tools—including a camera—from a box in the module undercarriage. Then he set to exploring. Surface surveyance wasn’t difficult compared to piloting the lunar module, but the unforgiving conditions meant they had limited time. A group of specialists had determined they had two hours and forty minutes, to be exact. Training here was getting the astronauts comfortable working within that time frame. The plan was to gather rocks and sand, set up equipment for experiments, and take carefully planned photos.

Lev handled the camera during their surveyance tasks. It had been developed especially for this environment; it lacked a viewfinder and was designed to be secured at chest height.

He pointed the camera at Nathan. “You’re live,” he said, noticing his own image reflected in Nathan’s visor.

“You won’t get a chance to shine in front of the camera, huh?” Nathan’s voice was tinged with guilt.

“I don’t mind. We’re not tourists on vacation. The Zirnitran citizens will be more than happy.”

The lunar camera was so heavy that the design engineers initially

balked at placing it on the module, citing its weight. The Soyuz Special Committee had insisted on it; photographing the achievement was a top priority.

Lev understood that the engineers wanted to omit technology unnecessary to lunar exploration. On the other hand, if he were an ordinary citizen, he'd want to see photos. The images would help demonstrate the mission had really been successful. Unfortunately, a number of people were convinced Mission 3 had been faked. Despite having no proof, they claimed the existing photos of the moon were retouched. Lev didn't want to pressure anyone to change their mind, but it bothered him that these people didn't understand the missions were real and extremely risky.

Criticism of Project Soyuz naturally included slander aimed at Irina. Lev had heard that all too often since arriving in Arnack. From humans, it was, "Why is a Zirnitran vampire flying up there using *our* taxes?" From dhampirs, it was, "They should send Odette instead."

Lev knew that only a small portion of Arnackians held those opinions, but they saddened him nonetheless. He wished Irina didn't have to hear any of them.

When it came to such criticisms, Nathan—who was born and raised in the UK—said, "I don't like that people can ignore the truth and criticize us so openly. Still, it's worse that they can't object at all in the UZSR."

They had different outlooks, but Nathan was right, which left Lev needled by his deep frustrations.

When the crew finished training, it was time for dinner. Instead of eating in the usual cafeteria, Lev and Nathan decided to visit an upscale restaurant in town. Nice meals were a small luxury the two men allowed themselves; given their busy training schedules, there was virtually no other way to spend their earnings. All they ever discussed was work anyway, so in practice, the only difference was the food. They took Nathan's car when they ate in town—he knew the roads better.

As they walked to the Manned Spacecraft Center's parking lot,

they quickly realized they weren't alone.

"Excuse me!"

Lev and Nathan turned to see a middle-aged man in a wrinkled shirt. An *Arnack News* reporter had somehow wormed his way onto the premises. Dabbing his forehead with a dirty handkerchief, he dashed toward them, probably looking for a scoop. Lev wanted to simply ignore him, but he followed ANSA's PR manual, answering questions as they strode to Nathan's car.

"What will your first words be when you land on the moon?" the reporter asked. "What do you think of the UK?"

Lev was tired of those questions, but he answered with a polite smile, as per the protocol.

The reporter was far from finished. "Are you aware that some people have criticized Irina's appointment as pilot?"

"I am."

"Your thoughts?"

"I don't see an issue. She's working more than hard enough to prove she deserves the position."

The questions and answers went on for a minute. Then the reporter focused on Nathan. "What do you think of being the second human to set foot on the moon, *after* Lev Leps?"

"It's irrelevant. We're all just carrying out our duties."

"Are you physically healthy?"

"Do you want to test that yourself?"

Nathan flexed his biceps, grinning. He was in such great shape, it was hard to believe he'd ever been sick enough to take time off. His physique spoke to his efforts—nobody in their late forties looked like that. As a middle-aged man who'd overcome infirmity and was now literally shooting for the moon, Nathan got lots of attention. The *Arnack News* reporter asked about his struggles and how he'd overcome his illness. Nathan answered with the smooth grace of someone who knew the questions well.

As Lev listened, something gnawed at him. Why *had* Nathan been a candidate for the final mission? According to Lt. Gen. Viktor, it was an ANSA public relations strategy—they liked Nathan's background. That

might've been true, but Lev had spent a lot of time with Nathan, and he was sure there was more to it. Yes, ANSA played up Nathan's comeback story, but Lev never saw the man make a single comment fishing for sympathy. He also didn't seem interested in the moon the way Lev and Irina were. What was it, then? Just a matter of glory? Did Nathan feel he had a responsibility to take a crew role as head of ANSA's astronaut training facility? Those thoughts swirled in Lev's mind as they approached the car.

"How do you feel about a vampire welcoming you back from the lunar surface? Do you think the moon will affect Irina?"

Lev snapped back to reality upon hearing her name. "What are you talking about?"

"Surely you've heard of Nosferatu Syndrome? That affliction causes dhampirs to fall into a bloodthirsty state and bite people. Couldn't such close proximity to the moon affect Irina?"

The question was ill-intentioned, but Lev held back his annoyance. "I don't know about that. I couldn't tell you."

The reporter pushed a little more. It felt as if he'd been fixated on these questions from the start. "It is possible Irina's vampirism has nothing to do with the moon, isn't it? After all, her bloodline stretches all the way back to the Originals."

"How about looking that up yourself?" Lev spat. He knew *Arnack News* was a third-rate tabloid, but he couldn't stand the reporter talking about Irina this way. His emotions were getting the best of him.

"Oh, but I did. They hold ceremonies where they chomp down on goats, huh? Personally, I can't help thinking it'd also be risky for that dhampir backup pilot to get so close to the moon."

"Let me tell you what you can do with your opinions..."

Nathan slid in front of Lev before the cosmonaut could say anything else. "We're a team," the older man said in a low voice, staring down the reporter. "We trust one another. That's all there is to it. If you have other questions, ask them through ANSA's Office of Public Information."

"Um, excuse me. I still have questions for Lev!"

Nathan glared at the reporter, who stumbled back a step. "Office of Public Information. Got it?"

Unlocking the car, Nathan casually gestured for Lev to get in. Lev knew the reporter had been baiting him; he cursed himself for almost falling for it.

Nathan sat and started the car, turning to Lev. “You just can’t keep your cool when someone asks about her.”

Lev couldn’t deny it. “I’m sorry. I...just lost myself.” It was the same as what had happened with Sagalevich all those years ago, as if he hadn’t learned a thing. He sank miserably into his seat.

“No harm, no foul.” Nathan chuckled. “It’s much better that we crew members get along than not.” He drove smoothly down the streets, humid night air drifting in through the car windows. “I should apologize for getting in the way of your honeymoon, though.”

“What?! Where’d that come from?”

“Anyone who heard Irina’s declaration knows how deeply you two care about each other.”

“Oh. That’s, uh...” Lev wasn’t sure how to finish.

Nathan laughed again, eyes focused on the road. “Did something happen when you went back to Zirnitra?”

If Odette noticed, it was no surprise Nathan had too. “Um...” Lev again trailed off uncertainly.

“Look, I don’t care what kind of relationship you two have. The media and the citizens may take an interest in love stories and drama, but I don’t. I only ask because I want to nip anything that might cause errors or disputes in the bud.”

Nathan was speaking from the heart. Over the hours and hours they’d trained together, he’d grown to trust and respect the man. If Mikhail had been his best friend, Nathan was like a comrade-in-arms or perhaps a senior officer, albeit a different sort than Lt. Gen. Viktor. Nathan was considerate and always happy to help Lev, whether by shooing away a pesky reporter or acting as chauffeur. He’d taught the cosmonaut more than his responsibilities on their spacecraft—he’d also walked Lev through Arnack’s cultural differences and domestic customs. Lev knew Nathan was in charge of the astronaut training facility thanks to those qualities.

The two of them were quiet for a time, with Nathan driving and Lev reflecting. It would rankle Nathan to know his crewmates were

hiding something from him. Moreover, Lev wanted to open up to him. When they returned from the moon, there would be a media circus—a whirlwind of questions. If Nathan knew how Irina felt about her people, Lev believed he too would protect her when rude reporters sniped at her.

He made up his mind. “I’ll tell you everything, but not a word of this to Irina, please.”

“Understood. We’ll keep it between you and me.” Nathan’s expression was unchanged. He steered away from the restaurant. “Let’s go for a bit of a drive, okay?”

Lev was direct, and he didn’t exaggerate. He told Nathan that Irina’s worries and heritage had led her to close herself off, but she’d never shown it because she despised people feeling sorry for her. Seeing humans as enemies, she’d put on a strong front. When she returned home to Anival, however, her heart had opened, and her training improved in turn. He told Nathan about everything except Irina drinking blood, assuring him that she’d never attacked a human due to lunar influence or Nosferatu Syndrome.

Afterward, Nathan nodded. “Thank you for telling me.”

Silence filled the car once more as Nathan drove onto the famed “Road to Space.” All the men could hear was the engine as the ocean breeze tickled their nostrils.

Lev felt that, if he was ever going to bring up what was on his mind, now was the time. “Do you mind if I ask something?”

“Of course not,” Nathan replied immediately.

“Why were you a candidate for the final mission? I don’t mean to sound rude, but you don’t strike me as someone who adores the moon or the stars. You don’t seem like someone hungry for glory either.”

“You’re right.”

“But didn’t you pull rank as the head of the training center? How come? I would’ve thought *someone* would complain that it was an abuse of power.”

Nathan’s expression softened a bit. “What I’m about to tell you can’t leave this car. It’s very personal.”

“Got it.”

Nathan paused. “I first became an astronaut because I saw the space program as an extension of the military. I thought of ANSA as a space army, and I was ready to fight the UZSR for the entire world’s freedom. But my body had other plans.”

“I heard that was when they told you that you weren’t eligible to fly into space.”

Sorrow spread across Nathan’s face. He kept his eyes on the road. “I heard the news about the spaceflights while I was hospitalized. I was miserable. My illness wasn’t that bad. If I recovered fully, I could still make it as an astronaut. I was in bad shape, though—and mentally I was falling apart. I cursed God above. ‘Why me?’ I thought. My fellow astronauts visited me, but that was just another source of pain.” The frustration he’d felt was clear in his words.

Lev said nothing, waiting for Nathan to go on.

“I went up to the hospital rooftop and looked at the night sky, although it wasn’t really like me to do that kind of thing. That’s where I met my young comrade-in-arms.”

Nathan pulled over, then passed Lev a photo from his wallet. It showed him slightly younger, his arm on the shoulders of a boy about ten years old. Both were pale, sickly, and dressed in hospital gowns, but they wore great big smiles.

The astronaut’s eyes grew distant as he looked out the window again. He spoke slowly. “He said the full moon was like a baseball. His dream was to play baseball under the sun. His hero wasn’t any astronaut—it was a baseball star. He was cheeky, all right. Once he told me, ‘I guess astronauts are okay, but you haven’t even gone to space. Doesn’t that just make you an old man?’ He’d undergone countless surgeries, and he wasn’t anywhere close to recovered. He was always optimistic, though. He might just have had a stiff upper lip. When I checked out of the hospital, I promised him I’d become an astronaut and stand on the moon. I said I’d prove recovering wasn’t a matter of miracles. I guess I just wanted to show him that even an old man could do the impossible.”

“So you made yourself a candidate for the final mission?”

“Uh-huh. When I returned to duty, I was told to take a desk job, but I refused. I built up my strength and threw myself into training to make sure no one could tell me I wasn’t worthy of being the first man

on the moon. That honor will go to you, of course. Still, second place should exceed the hopes of an old-fogey-turned-astronaut.” Nathan took the photograph and gingerly tucked it back in his wallet. “I haven’t told anyone about that promise. I advised ANSA to promote the story of a man overcoming a midlife illness. I knew there’d be blowback if people heard I was essentially doing this for a stranger. Not that I care when criticism’s restricted to me. I just didn’t want the media making a big fuss about him. I kept it under wraps.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” Lev smiled. “I won’t tell a soul.”

Nathan grinned. “We’ll add our confidential understanding to the Soyuz Treaty.”

The pair bumped fists.

Nathan looked out the window toward the moon shining in the distance. “What a nuisance we must be to the moon. It’s just a big rock that became a symbol of our hopes and dreams simply because it’s stuck there orbiting us.”

“We’re in the same boat,” Lev pointed out. “We’re just people, and we’ve started embodying hopes and dreams too.”

Another throaty chuckle tumbled from Nathan. “I’m not all that special, but I’ll happily do whatever I have to if it means inspiring hope in others. I’m just an old man who’s rising from the ashes like a phoenix. By the way, Lev, why do you want to go to the moon?”

Lev brought a hand over his heart, sighing. “I’ve dreamed of it forever. Somewhere along the way, that dream became my life.”

“I see.” Nathan nodded and put his hands on the steering wheel. “Well then, the last show we want to perform for the world is a hopeless nightmare. Let’s keep ourselves in top shape with thick, juicy steaks.”

“You’re paying, right?”

“You must be joking. That honor goes to the captain.”

Lev laughed. “Fair enough.”

Nathan started the car, and they drove with the moon in front of them. Looking out the window, Lev saw moonlight glimmer in the darkness of the silent sea. Waves sparkled like shooting stars.

“If only the lunar module were as easy to drive as a car.” Nathan tapped his steering wheel.

“Leave it to me. I’ll get us there and back. You’ll see.”

Nathan smiled. “I’d expect nothing less from you, Captain.”

He turned on the radio, and the Bees’ music drifted into the car. Rumor had it the band was breaking up. *“Let’s fly to the moon with the Zirnitrans,”* they sang. Space fever had gripped not just the Bees but the entire world. Commercials and TV shows were fixated on the moon and space.

With just three months left before the final mission, all Lev could do was pray Mission 4 went according to plan in October.

MISSION 4 OF PROJECT SOYUZ'S MANNED LUNAR LANDING PROJECT SUCCEEDS!

OCTOBER 29, 1969

Project Soyuz's fourth mission, which lasted from October 18 to 28, was a resounding success. Though billed as a rehearsal, the flight adhered precisely to the manned lunar landing's itinerary, barring descent to the lunar surface.

The manned spacecraft—dubbed "Margaritka" after the daisy symbolizing hope and peace—met the lunar module in moon orbit. The spiderlike lunar module has been named "Arachne" after the mythical mortal who was turned into a spider. The vessels docked, and two of Margaritka's crew members transferred to Arachne.

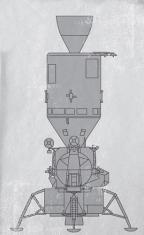
Following an inspection to approve all systems, Margaritka released Arachne. The latter craft descended to 15,000 meters above the lunar surface, traveling around the moon at hypersonic speeds and testing its engine by ascending once, then descending a second time. Personnel confirmed that the landing radar, communications systems, and autopilot were in working order. Additional photographs have now been taken of the planned landing zone, Mare Tranquillitatis. Gravitational abnormalities have also been recorded.

Having completed their key objectives, Arachne's crew released and jettisoned the lunar module's descent stage (the lower section resembling a spider's legs), initiating their second rendezvous with Margaritka. To avoid the bright sunlight (which was sufficiently intense to affect crew visibility), Arachne docked upside down, a maneuver it could only perform in zero gravity.

Mission 4's crew returned to Earth yesterday, confirming their accomplishment. Project Soyuz, a cooperative endeavor between the UZSR and UK,

continues to achieve remarkable results.

All that remains now is the final mission, in which astronauts from both nations will attempt a historic manned lunar landing.



Chapter 9: The Final Simulation

Indigo Eyes

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NEW MARSEILLE'S SEARING HEAT eased with the autumn breeze that arrived in November, making the weather slightly more bearable. It wasn't unlike Sangrad in August, and Irina felt her first pangs of homesickness.

"LAIKA44's climate really is best," she remarked.

Mission 4's crew had achieved their goals. The valuable data and experience they'd acquired on their journey would go a long way toward making the final mission safer. They'd paved even more of the road to the moon. There were only 15,000 meters to go.

The final mission was still scheduled for December, but Project Soyuz's scientists hadn't yet chosen the best launch and landing dates. The temperature and sunlight were only ideal for a manned landing a few days each month.

Lev, Irina, and Nathan were scheduled to begin preparing for launch in Zirnitra at the end of November. They'd stay in Arnack as long as possible to use its top-tier training facilities.

Updated mission guidelines were distributed to staff. A few sections were unfinished, and they'd be revised with the most accurate data after the final simulation just before launch. Still, every mission so far had borne out Project Soyuz's systems and calculations. Mission 4 had even accomplished the challenging lunar orbit rendezvous and docking procedure without errors. Lev had no doubt Irina would likewise handle it deftly.

Even after those successful test runs, the steepest challenge remained: the lunar landing itself. Mission 4 had provided plenty of valuable information to aid in that task. Additionally, they'd gained insight on the stability and conditions aboard the lunar module in flight. Although they hadn't tested those factors before, Mission 4's pilot

said the Manned Spacecraft Center's simulator was accurate. This demonstrated that the development team had been right all along. Controlling the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle also felt similar in terms of speed reduction and maintaining lateral stability, so it would prove extremely useful. All the more reason for Lev and his backup Stepan to throw themselves into further training.

The fall sky was clear after the recent hurricane. Lev was in midair, struggling to control the unsteady Lunar Landing Research Vehicle. In the real lunar module, during the final mission, Lev's would focus on the lunar surface and rely on Nathan for updates on their speed and tilt. Here in training, however, Lev was alone, and he had to keep an eye on everything himself. It was incredibly difficult, but the challenge only increased Lev's confidence. If he mastered *this*, he'd overcome whatever the lunar descent threw at him.

Stepan and the control crew watched from the ground, worry lining their faces. The wind was strong in the hurricane's aftermath, and with each gust, the research vehicle wobbled.

Lev wasn't thinking about the observers on the ground. As he flew, he pictured Mare Tranquillitatis stretching before him. In his spare time, he constantly examined the photos Arachne and Phoenix had taken, etching the lunar surface into his mind. He wanted to know every crater, stone outcrop, mountain, and valley that would show up along their planned flight path.

A strong gust of wind hit the research vehicle, and it tilted wildly. Shock struck Lev's heart like a lightning bolt.

"He's in danger!" Stepan cried.

Lev's body acted before he could think, bringing the vehicle back under control. He hovered in the air till he was almost out of fuel, then brought the vehicle back down to Earth. Managing low fuel levels was also part of training; if their planned landing zone proved unsuitable, Lev and Nathan would have to drift across the lunar surface until they found a new one. If Lev felt panicky here on Earth, that would just worsen during the actual mission. The pressure would crush him, and he'd be unable to think clearly.

Lev gently brought the research vehicle to a complete stop. Stepan and the ground control crew ran over.

"That was a close one, Lev!" Stepan said, voicing everyone's

worry.

“It was fine,” Lev replied coolly. “The research vehicle needs to feel like an extension of my body. I’ve got to control it under any conditions.”

“We thought for sure you were going to crash, though. You weren’t scared?”

“Of course I was. That last gust almost gave me a heart attack. My whole body broke into a cold sweat.” He showed his palms to prove it, laughing.

The others laughed with him, and Stepan gave an exaggerated shrug. “You haven’t changed a bit, Lev.”

While Lev worked with live training equipment, Nathan—whose main responsibility would be the computer—worked in the simulator. After finishing with the research vehicle, Lev joined him.

The simulator had been fine-tuned over time, thanks to data acquired by preceding missions. Now the displays showed a more detailed flight route to the landing zone, and the technology accounted for uneven lunar gravity, making the simulation less stable when appropriate. Despite those improvements, there was no way to recreate the reality of the rocky, uneven lunar surface. Lev knew simulations just offered a point of reference, but he had to navigate them perfectly for any chance of success during the real mission.

Every simulation was like a battle between the crew and the supervising engineers. The engineers’ job was to create issues, and the crew’s was to overcome them. Today, the engineers ran a program that caused a thruster nozzle to malfunction, preventing the craft from changing direction. Lev stayed calm as they lost trajectory control, looking for a solution.

“I’ll try tilting the module to change direction,” he told Nathan.

“Understood.” Nathan quickly read off the data he needed.

Lev tried reangling the module to overcome the malfunction. If he responded wrong, and the module crashed, they could try again—that was the benefit of the simulator. What mattered most was learning from each failure. Yet when the simulated troubles became excessive, it frustrated the crew and wore on their morale. They always tried to remain coolheaded, but ultimately they were people, not machines.

At the same time, Lev and Nathan weren't complaining. They overcame each and every challenge, so the supervising engineer faced them with multiple malfunctions that left no options for survival whatsoever.

"This is insane," Lev muttered as they crashed into the moon. It didn't feel like practice at all—it felt more like the *point* was to crash.

"I don't mind you making this tougher, but there're limits," Nathan snapped at the engineer. "We're likelier to win the lottery than see these kinds of problems."

"Sorry," the engineer said guiltily, realizing the scenario had been over the top. "I pushed the simulator to its limits."

"We don't have time for that. This isn't a game. It's training!"

"I wasn't treating it as a game!"

Everyone was taking their work seriously, so tensions were high. Lev jumped in to smooth things over. "Nathan, if we can imagine a problem, then it's a potential reality. We have to be ready for anything. People *do* win the lottery, right?" He flashed his training partner a smile.

Nathan chuckled, scratching the back of his head. "You're right. Guess I'm just mad because I still haven't." He apologized to the engineer and thrust out a hand. "I never have any luck with the lottery. You?"

The engineer shook Nathan's hand. "Uh...as a matter of fact, I bought a car with a jackpot I won," he admitted, looking even more apologetic.

"How about sharing some of that luck with Lev and me?"

The air around the team relaxed.

"Let's do one more run," Lev suggested. "Give us everything you've got!"

Responding to the unexpected truly tested the crew's abilities. That was where they'd have to shine. Knowing that, Lev wanted to experience everything he could, and the engineers were helping him do so.

The deep-purple sky glittered with stars as Lev finished training for the day. He'd been biking to and from work as physical training, and

now he cycled through New Marseille, following the gently sloped roads to his house. He'd gotten used to this commute, and it struck him that this was the last month he'd get to experience it. Melancholy and evening chill sank into his bones.

When Lev arrived home, he spotted Irina at the house across from his. She sat in a rocking chair in her front yard, moongazing with a notebook in her hand. That was rare for her—she usually studied indoors in the evenings. Lev got the sense that something was amiss. She'd spent the day with Odette in the CSM mission simulator; maybe they'd had an issue.

Leaving his bike at his house, Lev jogged across the street. Irina waved when she noticed him. Instantly, Lev knew he was right—something *was* bothering her.

"I'm tired," she told him. "I ran lunar module rescue drills all day." Her long sigh captured how downcast she felt.

Even if he and Nathan reached the lunar surface, they still hadn't tested the lunar module's ascent in lunar gravity—one-sixth of Earth's. It wasn't yet certain the module could make it back to Irina, who'd await them 15,000 meters from the lunar surface. They expected the return trip would be much easier than the lunar landing. As long as the spacecraft functioned as designed, they shouldn't have problems. That wasn't based on anything more than calculations, though.

In the case of a crash landing, what would they do? What if the lunar module touched down at a bad angle or damaged its thrusters? They simply wouldn't know until such a thing occurred. They could also encounter pre-landing problems that forced them to abort the mission and make an emergency return to Earth.

Irina stared at the sky, her expression troubled. "If the lunar module takes off at a weird angle and flies in an unexpected direction, my only option will be to chase you." In fact, eighteen contingency plans required the CSM to rescue a lunar module lost in orbit, and Irina had to work solo in each. "I didn't have any simulator issues, but..." She looked down at the notebook in her hands.

"What's the matter? Are you scared?"

"No. It's just...the supervising engineer asked what I'd do in a situation where I could only save you *or* Nathan. I didn't have an answer. Neither did Odette."

The question was cruel, yes, but unfortunately necessary. The mission guidelines in fact contained details on what to do if the lunar landing ended in tragedy. If the lunar module couldn't launch from the surface, the crew would finish the mission with a final transmission: "End communications. Over and out." Both nations' leaders would then contact the crew's families to express grief and gratitude. An official condolence letter had already been drafted: "*Their grand destiny now rests in peaceful slumber on the surface of the moon.*"

Yet there were no instructions on what to do if only one crew member could be rescued from the lunar module. Lev hadn't considered it, but he already knew it was best to decide that on Earth.

He knelt by the rocking chair, looking her in the eyes. "Hey, Irina. If that comes to pass, don't think about dying. As for who to save, you need to choose Nathan."

Irina's eyes widened. "Lev..."

"We can't entertain letting an Arnackian crew member die so the two Zirnitrans survive. I'm captain, and it's my duty to ensure my crew's safety. I'll be the first person to set foot on the lunar surface, but that honor comes with a lot of responsibility. Besides, what better place to pass away than among the stars? That's how I've felt ever since I was just a reserve cosmonaut candidate." He took Irina's hand.

She squeezed it. "All right. If I have to, I'll let you go."

"That's for the best."

"But I won't stop looking for a way to get us all home till there's no other choice."

"Of course not. We'll do our best as a team. You'll have me, Nathan, and mission control helping you look for options."

She gripped his hand tighter. "I'll never give up."

"We can imagine all the worst-case scenarios and possible tragedies, but we'll never see them come to pass. We can't allow them to. We have to push away our fears and pave our path to success."

"Right. Thanks, Lev." Irina cracked a smile, clutching her notebook to her chest. "We're so close to the mission, I think I'm getting worn out. I had a small crisis of confidence."

Lev stood and gave Irina a pat on the head. "So did I. I've lost count of how many times my confidence has slipped, to be honest."

There's so much to remember—sometimes I don't think I'm prepared. I often wonder if I made a mistake and forgot something important. But the three of us are riding the hard work of hundreds of thousands of people. That's what'll take us to the moon. Let's believe in everyone and stand strong. You specialize in putting on a strong front, right?"

"Hmph! I'm not putting on a strong front. I *am* strong." Passion welled in Irina's eyes.

Lev was relieved at her reply. He knew their fears would never go away. They'd be present during training, and on the flight itself, staying with him till they completed their mission.

For now, their job was to overcome those fears and keep moving forward.

Training and launch prep went smoothly. Then the Soyuz Special Committee suddenly issued an unexpected order: Lev and Nathan were to place four commemorative items on the moon after landing.

Jennifer relayed the order, since it pertained to public relations. "Sorry. I don't have the authority to refuse," she said, head hanging low. She was clearly under immense pressure. Lev didn't know what to say, so he listened as Jennifer detailed the items.

The first was a plaque engraved with an image of Earth split into East and West, as well as the message DECEMBER, 1969: HUMANITY ARRIVED HERE IN THE NAME OF PEACE ON EARTH. The plaque would attach to the lunar module's leg. Following their landing, Lev would remove the plaque's cover, describe it to the world, and set it on the moon's surface.

The second item was a silicon disc 3.8 centimeters across. It held prerecorded messages from national representatives around the globe, including Queen Sundancia.

Both struck Lev as fitting ways to commemorate their achievement, and their schedule already included time to leave such objects behind.

What he wasn't sure about were the last two items: a pair of flags, one Arnackian and one Zirnitran. They were certainly large—100 by 150 centimeters each. Lev and Nathan didn't like being strong-armed

into holding a flag-planting ceremony with zero scientific benefit while working on limited time.

It wasn't just their schedule that was the issue—it was the flags themselves. The Outer Space Treaty of 1967 stated, "Outer space is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty." Even if flags weren't an explicit message of conquest, they gestured toward it. People would take them as a statement about the world's balance of power. Neither the UK nor the UZSR needed to "conquer" the moon to make it a symbol of their strength; they just had to demonstrate that no other nation had attained their scientific might.

Lev sensed the NWO pulling the strings of the global narrative behind the scenes, but he kept that thought to himself. He couldn't tell Nathan or Jennifer about the organization.

"Surely the queen's against such an aggressive show of power?" Nathan said, nonplussed.

"I assume so," Jennifer replied. "However, this was a decision between governments. It bypassed the royal family."

Nathan nodded reluctantly, crossing his arms. "It's not like we have the right to say anything. They're letting us fly their spacecraft. If it's part of the mission, I'll do as ordered."

"Thanks." Jennifer turned to Lev and Irina, looking pained.

Lev offered a hesitant nod of his own. Nathan was right. They weren't in a position to refuse, and doing so would only cause Jennifer more hassle. "I wish this could be considered a *global* achievement, but it is what it is."

"Uh-huh," Irina agreed. "I know all too well that higher-ups do whatever they like. This is just more of the same."

Jennifer heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank you. I actually don't think future generations will care what you leave on the moon. They'll just talk about the courage you showed and the challenges you overcame. As ANSA's television rep, I'll make sure your work and efforts are crystal clear." Flashing them a confident smile, she left the meeting room.

Nathan stood and clapped to clear the air. "We expected this kind of thing. Let's get back to training." He trudged out of the room, leaving Lev and Irina alone with their thoughts.

Lev had never intended to tell Nathan about the NWO. Regardless, he wondered whether he should, given their influence. He asked Irina her thoughts.

“Best not to say anything, if you ask me,” she said quickly.

“How come?”

“We have no proof the NWO arranged this. Besides, if we tell Nathan, we’ll want to tell Queen Sundancia. Then we’ll want to tell Kaye and Bart. It’ll never end.” She made a good point.

“Yeah. Plus, it doesn’t seem like saying anything would do any good.”

When Nathan agreed to Jennifer’s orders, he’d made it clear that he’d do his duty and avoid overstepping. He wouldn’t feel any better if he knew powerful elites were manipulating them, and that might also erode his trust in the UZSR. Lev decided to stay quiet.

Nathan poked his head back in. “What’re you two talking about?”

Lev made up an excuse on the fly. “I was just thinking out loud... What if the lunar surface is so tough we can’t plant flagpoles into it?”

“They might even snap when you try,” Irina added.

Nathan grinned. “Even if we get them in the ground, the lunar module’s thrusters will probably blow them over when we take off.”

Irina giggled. “And the sun will hit them hard enough to bleach them white. They’ll disintegrate into dust.”

The three looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“We’ll have to keep this conversation top secret,” Lev said, holding back further snickers.

“Roger that,” Nathan and Irina replied in unison.

Regardless of who was pulling the strings and the nature of their ambitions, the final mission’s goals and crew remained unchanged. Earth’s people were counting on them to succeed. Lev, Nathan, and Irina had to live up to those expectations. The crew’s true duty would be to inspire hope in the work of tomorrow and the future beyond.

On November 12—two weeks after Mission 4's success—Brian Damon, Professor Vil Klaus, and Director Volkov's specialist team gathered to confirm the final mission's schedule and finalize its launch date. The lunar module would launch on December 18, and the manned spacecraft on December 21. The lunar landing was planned for December 25.

Preparations on-site proceeded smoothly as hundreds of engineers finished inspecting machine parts. Both nations were hard at work readying their respective launch sites. Mission control sharpened their skills with simulations. The spacecrafts' systems and communications were revised and improved based on feedback from previous missions.

The crew also started their final preparations. Lev had memorized the lunar topography, and he piloted the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle as if it were truly an extension of his body. He, Nathan, and Irina were perfect in the simulator—they overcame all issues through teamwork, plus their acquired knowledge and skills.

The mission guidelines outlining protocol for all possible scenarios had been updated after Mission 4. Only the section on the lunar landing had yet to be finalized. Lev heard it was supposed to be revised after the final mission simulation.

One worry still itched at the back of his mind. The mission guidelines stated categorically that the final decision to abort always came down to mission control. That had held true during all the previous missions, but was it the right approach to their descent phase? He didn't think so, but he couldn't quite articulate his worries, so they lingered within him.

In late November, nations around the world grew lively as cities looked forward to the year's end. Project Soyuz personnel, however, remained serious and diligent as they hurriedly prepared for the final mission. They checked in on everything—the launch sites, both nations' control centers, the crew and backups, and the staff who'd work in ground stations around the globe. They reviewed strategies for maintaining the crew's health and what would happen upon their return, as well as how to navigate emergencies. Everyone working on,

reviewing, and updating those elements felt exhausted, but it encouraged them to know a place in the annals of history was around the corner. The final mission was just a month away.

Every relevant department participated in the final simulation at New Marseille's Manned Spacecraft Center. Lev, Irina, and Nathan entered the CSM mission simulator and touched base with mission control while they checked the vessel's systems, just as they would during the flight. Irina's hard work paid off—she flawlessly completed lunar orbit rendezvous and docking on the first try.

“Great work!” Lev exclaimed. “Looking good, Irina!”

Irina kept her joy in check. “Thanks, Captain, but it's just part of the job.”

When Project Soyuz began, many people within and outside ANSA had doubted Irina's abilities. They'd criticized her role on the final mission's crew, dismissing her as little more than the vampire who'd sat around on a vessel during its first flight through space. Very few people went out on a limb for her. But Irina never backed down, and her success in the final simulation tossed what doubts people had to the wind.

Once the simulation's lunar descent and landing phase began, it was time for Lev and Nathan to prove themselves. They entered the lunar module simulator, leaving Irina.

“You two aren't going to screw this up, are you?” she demanded.

Lev grinned. “If we do, I'll buy everyone steaks.”

The simulation continued. Lev and Nathan went about their work, guided by the training that had honed their skills for this scenario. No one had cause to rejoice at their excellent performance—as in Irina's case, success in the simulation was taken for granted. Failing here would've led to a grave meeting for all parties concerned.

This simulation ensured that everyone involved in the final mission could respond quickly and accurately to whatever conditions arose. It was a chance to prepare and to boost everyone's confidence. On the other hand, it could potentially mean a scenario no one wanted: hitting the abort button to end the mission.

In the simulator, a loud buzzer went off. DSKY's warning light flashed yellow, indicating an HGC issue.

“Nathan, error code, please.”

“On it.”

Nathan used DSKY to determine the error code, and the display provided a number. Neither man knew what the number indicated, but that wasn’t an issue.

“New Marseille, we’re seeing error code 1001,” Lev told mission control. “Request definition.”

“*Looking into it now,*” replied Aaron Fifield, who was serving as CAPCOM. “*But if there are no other issues, you’re clear to proceed.*”

Mission control quickly worked out the issue. After Lev followed CAPCOM’s directions, the warning light blinked off.

There were around a hundred error codes. Some indicated critical problems that would require they immediately abort, but mission control could investigate most, then fix or work around them. That meant Lev didn’t need to remember everything himself. It would be preferable if he did, but the crew already had too much to remember. It was best to depend on others when possible.

As the lunar module simulator continued to descend to the lunar surface, another warning buzzer went off. This time, the error code was different. Lev contacted mission control again.

“*It’s an engine malfunction,*” said CAPCOM. “*Abort. I repeat, mission abort.*”

Although that decision prioritized the crew’s lives, it was the last thing anybody wanted to hear. Lev would now have to hit the abort button and return the lunar module to Irina, waiting in lunar orbit. “I know it’s just a simulation, but this is so depressing,” he said with a sigh.

He was about to push the button when Nathan turned to him. “I don’t know what that error is, but the engine data looks fine,” he muttered. “Is it a simulator issue?”

Sudden, sharp fear pierced Lev. The uncertainty that had nagged at him for so long was suddenly clear. *If this happened on the mission, what would we do?*

The data onboard the lunar module allowed for a landing, but the mission control center hundreds of thousands of kilometers away had decided to abort. The thought filled Lev with despair. It was like being

tossed into the darkness of outer space.

Nathan elbowed him. “Push the button, Lev.”

That snapped Lev back to his senses. “Oh, right.” He hit the button, abandoning the mission. The lunar module jettisoned its descent stage and left the moon behind.

Lev broke into a cold sweat. If they didn’t change the guidelines now, this horrible outcome could occur. The mission would end, and Lev wouldn’t even have a say in that decision. When the simulation ended, he ran from the simulator to the mission control center. He wanted to talk directly to Brian Damon, the man in charge of the entire mission, and recommend revising the guidelines.

“I came by as this flight’s captain to ask that for the lunar descent phase—and only that phase—you leave deciding to abort in the crew’s hands.”

“What?” Damon frowned.

Lev’s suggestion immediately disquieted the nearby ground control officers, and they whispered among themselves.

“Please don’t misunderstand.” Lev was desperate to convince Damon. “I trust the ground control team, but the moon’s 380,000 kilometers from this location. Your judgments come purely from data, and exchanging a message and reply entails a lag of almost three seconds. Nathan and I will be gazing right down at the moon from directly above. If I feel we have a real chance of landing, but you tell me to abort, I’ll have to give up. I don’t want to be put in that situation. I promise I won’t do anything reckless. If we get a critical warning that our lives are in danger, or if you recognize that the craft’s clearly malfunctioning, I’ll follow your orders and abort.”

“I see...or, well, I see where you’re coming from.” Damon wasn’t completely convinced. He crossed his arms, lapsing into thought.

Lev turned his attention to the officers. “Look, we misjudge things a lot. All kinds of things could happen. Maybe a communications error. Or data from the craft might not reach Earth properly. Or the alarm system itself might malfunction. If our lunar landing attempt ends there, it’ll haunt me forever.”

“Lev, let me ask one thing,” said Aaron, who’d been quietly listening in.

“Go ahead.”

“Are you aware that, to be blunt, you could ignore mission control’s orders and keep descending?”

Lev nodded. “Yes. To be honest, I considered that. But I want to avoid it. Going to the moon with those thoughts would be like betraying the whole ground control team. A landing that succeeds because I breach orders won’t satisfy any of us. I want everyone to be happy with how the mission turns out.”

“Same here.” Aaron turned to Damon. “From the crew’s viewpoint, Lev’s right. Compared to the view he and Nathan will have from the module, personnel on Earth will see an entirely different moon.”

Bart, who sat in the control room’s front row, got to his feet. “I agree. We also have to consider the flip side of Lev’s example. I mean, we might give the order to proceed when the crew feels it’s best to abort. The guidelines should be flexible.”

Damon took his time studying each person’s expressions. Then he rose to his feet, walking slowly toward Lev until they faced one another. “We’ll put our crew’s lives first. Can you promise you won’t attempt a reckless landing?”

“Yes. My goal’s not to crash on the moon. We’ll abort if the situation’s dangerous.”

“All right. Then we’ll update the guidelines so we both have the authority to decide whether to abort during the lunar descent phase.” Damon held his hand out to Lev. “We trust our astronauts.”

Lev shook Damon’s hand, his gratitude clear. “It’s thanks to all of you that the crew can do what it does. We won’t let you down.”

He reviewed the rules around aborting the mission with the ground control officers. Then, before leaving the control center, he had a word with Bart.

“Thank you for your support.”

Bart looked a little sheepish, but he stood tall. “Don’t mention it. I really thought you were right.”

“By the way, if you have spare time in the next couple of weeks, how about dinner? Irina and I would love to have you and Kaye over to one of our houses before we head back to Zirnitra.”

Bart's eyes lit up. "We'd love to! I'll talk to Kaye, and we'll sort out our schedules."

The engineer's excitement made Lev glad he'd asked. Things would be a bit calmer with the final simulation behind them; they'd all have a little more free time.

With the crew's journey to the UZSR fast approaching, Bart and Kaye finished work at the Manned Spacecraft Center and headed to the hills where Lev and Irina lived.

The four of them gathered in Lev's backyard for a simple dinner. The table was laden with hamburgers, seafood stew, and other dishes they'd bought in town. New Marseille was warm year round, but the temperature dropped during autumn evenings. Still, nobody minded their food getting cool. They wanted to eat under the stars.

Lev generally drank at gatherings like this, but he opted to hold off this time. The launch was just around the corner, so the crew were taking special care of their bodies. He also planned to study after dinner. Bart, like Irina, couldn't hold his alcohol, and Kaye didn't want to drink alone, so everyone had glasses of soda water with lemon slices. Dinner was a short, simple affair; like Lev, the others planned to study afterward.

"Thank you so much for making time to meet while you're so busy." Lev held his glass to the moon. "To the final mission's success!"

"Cheers!" Their four voices rang in the air, echoing in the starry sky.

Lev drank his soda water in one quick gulp. It refreshed his mind, and the wafting scent of lemon eased the day's stress. "Preparations for dinner were a bit hasty," he acknowledged. "We'll save the real feast for after the mission succeeds!"

"I still can't believe it's happening," Bart said. "A cooperative lunar landing was just a pipe dream for the longest time. Now it's almost reality. Right, Kaye?"

Kaye nodded sagely. "Seeing our computer in an actual spacecraft is amazing. Maybe the Zirnitran engineering team wouldn't believe this,

but when we started, ANSA's computer engineers were relegated to a little basement room that only had wooden boxes to sit on during coffee breaks."

Lev really did find it unbelievable that Kaye was treated so poorly. Computers were now the crux of their missions. He wondered if her dhampir heritage had played into things.

Irina peered enviously at the Arnackians. "The HGC's the whole reason I can fly the spacecraft by myself. I'm not the only one who feels that way. The other cosmonauts agree, right, Lev?"

"It's true. If you asked me to pilot the lunar module entirely manually, I'd find it impossible. We'll count on your help with any error codes, Bart." Lev dipped his head respectfully toward his colleague.

Bart's chest puffed with pride. "Roger that! I'll be ready to give you answers on anything that pops up! We just added a program to stop bugs from freezing the computer!"

He leaped into a passionate explanation. If the HGC was overloaded during a flight, a warning bell would ring, and every program would automatically shut down so the computer could prioritize the most important tasks. At least, that was as much as Lev and Irina understood.

Irina sat gaping until Kaye swooped in to save them. "That's enough of that," she said, gently tapping Bart's shoulder. "As long as *we* understand how it works, it's fine."

Bart froze for a moment, then cringed as he came back to his senses. "Uh, sorry. I got a little carried away."

Lev waved it off, telling him not to worry. "We couldn't make anything like the HGC in Zirnitra. It's truly incredible. Everyone talks about it like groundbreaking magic."

It was just a pity Korovin wasn't here to see it. If he'd been in charge, he would've been captivated by Arnack's computing technology, and Lev felt the nations' partnership would've surpassed anything any of them imagined.

At that moment, something bloomed in Lev's heart: a desire for Bart and Kaye to learn about Korovin. He quickly stamped the feeling down. Korovin was still a national secret, and Lev didn't want the Delivery Crew to become suspicious of his friends. Maybe he couldn't

tell them now, but he believed Slava Korovin's name would eventually be revealed to the world. Moreover, Lev had concocted a plan to help the chief designer's name echo surreptitiously throughout the world till then.

"Anyway, help yourselves," he told them.

Bart and Kaye timidly reached for some food. Conversation was stilted and awkward at first, but it soon relaxed into something more natural. They discussed the mission, of course, but also a slew of other topics. It was refreshing to Lev, whose life had revolved around training and study since Project Soyuz began. He asked for Bart and Kaye's impressions of Zirnitra. The pair told him the lack of freedom surprised them. Neither felt they could ever live there, although a business trip was fine. When they asked Lev his impressions of Arnack, his response was similar. He thought the freedom was wonderful, but he couldn't help feeling like sometimes there was too much of it.

Time flew by, and their dinner approached its end. Suddenly, Bart and Kaye grew nervous and hesitant. Kaye, face flushed pink, whispered in Bart's ear. Holding hot dogs, Lev and Irina exchanged perplexed glances.

"We wanted to tell you two something today." Bart mustered the courage to speak on. "After the final mission...Kaye and I are getting married."

"Huh?!" Lev and Irina's cries of surprise rose skyward in harmony.

Bart scratched the back of his head, a bashful look on his face. "It's a secret. The only other person who knows is my brother. We're not wearing them at work, but we have these."

Bart and Kaye pulled beautiful rings from their pockets and slid them on.

The moment Irina saw them, she put her hand to her heart. A beautiful smile blossomed on her face. "They're stunning!"

Something clenched Lev's heart when he saw her expression. Irina never wore any accessories other than her necklace, but even she saw these rings as important—as symbols of promises.

The tips of Kaye's ears reddened, and she giggled. "I know we're kind of springing this on you, but we weren't sure when we could tell you if not tonight."

“Congratulations,” Lev said. “I’m sure it’ll be a hot topic when you announce it.”

Bart’s face grew slightly troubled. “It would be, if we *could*.”

“Hm? You mean you don’t want the media getting too excited about it?”

“Well, that’s its own can of worms, but no. It’s just...there’s another reason.” Bart and Kaye exchanged looks, a hint of sorrow in their tense lips. “Aaron was delighted for us, but my parents don’t approve. The Fifield family has a distinguished history that stretches back generations. My brother married a woman from a similar family. I think they might be rejecting Kaye because she’s a dhampir.”

The smile had disappeared from Kaye’s face. She looked at the ground, sadness in her eyes.

It depressed Lev to think that Arnack’s history had led to this scenario. He knew each family had unique circumstances, and it wasn’t his place to criticize when he didn’t know the full story. Yet he was aware that Bart and Kaye’s situation overlapped with Irina’s worries. He glanced over at her.

“That’s a shame,” Irina said. “I mean, we’re all Earthlings, right?”

“Earthlings?”

“Yes. All four of us here at this table are different, but if you look from space, we’re all the same. You know?”

Kaye glanced over at Bart, and the couple chuckled.

“Thanks, Irina,” Kaye said, beaming.

“Oh, I stole that line from Lev,” Irina replied.

Lev was embarrassed to suddenly be the center of attention. “Irina and I just talked one time about being the same at heart.”

“How about you two?” Kaye asked abruptly.

Lev cocked his head, confused. “Us two?”

“Sorry. I just always thought you and Irina would get married. I wondered if you had firm plans for that.”

“Oh. Um...”

Lev wasn’t sure how to answer. It seemed fine to discuss this with Bart and Kaye, but he wanted to put Irina’s feelings first. He turned to

her. When their eyes met, she nodded; it was all right to tell them.

“I hate to disappoint you after hearing your wonderful news, but given the circumstances, we aren’t getting married. That said, we’ve decided to spend our lives together.”

“Oh...the circumstances,” Kaye murmured awkwardly. “I see.”

“The decision was mine.” Irina smiled at Kaye. “It’s a bit selfish—and a little heavy—but do you mind if I explain it? It’s not anywhere in *Howling at the Moon*, but it’s because of my past and history.”

Bart and Kaye nodded.

Irina took a breath and spoke. She was objective about the facts, making it clear she wasn’t after sympathy. She told them how her parents and village had suffered at humankind’s hands, how she’d left Anival alone to realize her dream, and how she was almost murdered once her test subject role ended. She admitted that she hadn’t gone home even once till recently, since she thought she’d betrayed her people by achieving her dreams with human technology.

Kaye teared up as she listened to everything Irina had been through. Bart gently put a hand on her back. Perhaps Kaye’s dhampir heritage came with its own painful memories.

“Our race, which humankind labeled ‘vampires,’ isn’t treated with dignity,” Irina went on. “We have no family registers or nationalities. We aren’t human or animal, which makes us true outsiders. The day I was revealed to be history’s first cosmonaut, I was made a Zirnitran citizen, but that was really a convenience. The government wanted to use me for its own purposes. Since that nationality was forced on me, I consider it a sham. I could only wed Lev by *choosing* to become a full Zirnitran citizen and siding with the nation that oppressed my people. My heart simply won’t allow that, so I told Lev we couldn’t marry.”

Irina looked at Lev, seeking acknowledgment. He smiled at her.

That put her at ease, and she continued. “In Zirnitra, a man and woman face many difficulties if they decide to spend their lives together but don’t marry. For instance, childrearing is harder. I understand why—marriage is part of daily life in Zirnitra. I imagine it’s the same in Arnack as it is in Anival. No unmarried couples live together there. But Lev and I talked a lot about what to do, and in the end, we reached the same conclusion.”

Lev picked up for Irina. “I wasn’t sure about our relationship or future lives. But we realized together that nothing actually has to change. Irina and I have traveled the world since both becoming cosmonauts. In retrospect, I see how marriage differs depending on time and place. We don’t have to cave to social pressure from the people around us. The UZSR put Irina through so much, we don’t need them to recognize our relationship officially. What’s common practice and common sense now might be unheard of in the future, so we’ll choose where and how to live ourselves.”

Lev didn’t tell the Arnackians he and Irina had also agreed that, if the government *ordered* them to marry, they wouldn’t do so for nothing. They’d find a way to exploit the situation.

Bart and Kaye were silent.

“Sorry,” Lev said. “We probably shouldn’t have launched into that right after you broke the news of your engagement. But our positions differ, and we wanted to be honest. I hope you understand.”

“I’m truly happy to hear you two are marrying!” Irina added, a touch panicky. “I’m excited for both of you. I mean that from the heart. My attitude toward my relationship with Lev is a bit self-serving and off-putting, but don’t let it worry you. I’m sorry to spoil the moment.”

Bart shook his head. “Please, don’t apologize. It just caught me a bit off guard. I think doing what you prefer is your best bet.”

Kaye nodded. “Same here. I’ve never heard someone make a case for sticking together without getting married. Your stance really touched me.”

Bart and Kaye had accepted their decision. Lev glanced at Irina, and they sighed in relief.

Something dawned on Kaye then. “If you choose that path for yourselves, might it encourage more people to do likewise?”

That could be true. Lev thought back to what Lyudmila had told him. *“Visiting space, visiting a whole new world, gave you the power to lead people. Succeed in your revolution, and you’re a hero; fail, and you’re a traitor.”*

He wasn’t about to lead any revolutions, but visiting the moon was an achievement that would draw the world’s attention. How he lived afterward might influence people. That was a heavy responsibility

in a way, but it also gave him more direct power than the invisible specter of the NWO. Lev felt even more certain that, as long as he lived true to himself and didn't crack under pressure, the future was bright. To reach that future, nothing was more important than the present.

"Well, first and foremost, we have to pull off the final mission," he said.

"I believe we will," replied Irina.

"Me too," said Bart.

"Me three," added Kaye.

"We'll make it to the moon and return to Earth," Lev declared, buoyed by their confidence.

The four looked toward the evening sky. A few clouds hovered in the darkness near the moon, which was sharing its unbelievably beautiful light with the world.

"After the lunar landing, manned space travel might come next," mused Irina, eyes still on the sky.

"Before they canceled Project Hyperion, space exploration *was* supposed to continue beyond the moon landing," Bart said. He added with a touch of sorrow, "As far as I can tell, though, there're no further plans for that."

The value of manned exploration had been debated fiercely since space development started. Once the final mission's crew had served as flagbearers and ended the race to the moon, the focus might shift to unmanned spacecraft.

"I hope 'planetary cookie' space travel becomes a reality someday." Moonlight glimmered in Kaye's eyes. "Even if we never see it in our lifetime, I want to be part of its foundation."

Lev couldn't have agreed more. "That's what I hope for too."

If the people of the world demanded manned space travel, it was sure to continue. Arnack and Zirnitra's space-development rivalry would give rise to new tools and technologies. The NWO also wanted that, since it would advance science and the human race.

Lev knew that leading the way to the future was the job of space program personnel. Even if his relationship with Irina could influence the world, space development overall was much more powerful.

Governments and conglomerates lorded over Earth, but Lev could still share space development's importance with people. Space was bigger than them all.

He could do little alone, but around him were trustworthy friends. All four had been born and raised in completely different circumstances, but that meant they could reach an even wider variety of people. Eight years had passed since they first met at the 21st Century Expo, and much had changed, from their positions and ranks to the very state of the world. One thing always remained the same, though: their passion for space. Now it was up to them to ensure that passion burned ever brighter.

Lev picked up his glass, smiling at his friends. "In Zirnitra, we toast to our hearts' content. So, how about a toast to the future *beyond* the final mission?" Irina, Bart, and Kaye nodded and lifted their glasses. Lev held his high, shouting, "To space development's future!"

"Cheers!"

From a tiny corner of Earth, they raised their glasses toward the far reaches of space. When the final mission ended, they'd meet again and again to toast new adventures, new discoveries, and the joy those accomplishments brought.

The four of them pictured the changing future, each with a different light in their eyes as they gazed at the moon. They all wished for brighter days, but none would settle for wishes. They'd stride forward on their path and confront the unknown, taking the future in their own hands.

Chapter 10: Launch

Indigo Eyes

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N DECEMBER 1, the crew for Project Soyuz's final mission touched down at Sangrad's nearest airport. The breath of Moroz blew strong, and pure-white snow covered the land. Nathan and Odette shivered. The subzero temperatures were a far cry from New Marseille's. Even Lev, who was used to the weather, felt the chill cut to his bones.

Irina alone was lively and energetic, unable to hide her joy from her freezing crewmates. "This weather's amazing!" she said with a satisfied sigh. "How about we make the most of it with some of Zirnitra's famous ice cream?"

"If you suggest that, I'm in!" Odette said, excited.

That threw Irina into momentary panic. "Hold on! It was a joke. You can't freeze right before the mission."

She was right. With the launch just weeks away, even catching a simple cold could jeopardize everything. There was still so much to do. The plan was to head to the Neglin in Sangrad, where they'd meet officials and carry out media duties. After staying overnight in the city, they'd be off to the Albinar Cosmodrome.

Odette brimmed with curiosity about Sangrad. She leaned over to whisper in Irina's ear. "I shouldn't do anything suspicious, right?"

"Not unless you want to be arrested." Irina's eyes darted toward the Delivery Crew detail arriving to escort them.

In the airport lobby, the crew passed Zirnitran citizens carrying both nations' flags. They jumped on the bus that would take them to Sangrad.

The city was plastered with posters promoting the lunar landing, and the crew were plastered all over the local magazines. Now that the final mission was on the horizon, Sangrad was abuzz. What most surprised Lev was that Zirnitrans were lining up to buy Arnackian cola.

The sight of the once-contraband drink being sold openly made him feel as if he were in a different country. Much had changed since the countries' heads of state met after Mission 2 succeeded. Now, it was even possible to buy Zirnitran products in Arnack.

Of course, it was a good thing that the barrier between the UK and UZSR had come down. Yet there was also a chill in Lev's heart, like winter wind sneaking through cracks in a wall. It stemmed from the fact that they'd be meeting the instigator of these changes—Zirnitra's puppet leader—to say a few words marking their launch.

Lev's crew headed to the Neglin's office of the Ministerial Cabinet. There, Zirnitra's senior officials had gathered for an official send-off. The event was largely for historical and promotional purposes, and Gergiev was dressed formally. Lurking in the shadows behind him was Demidov, who seemingly preferred the darkness.

State-approved journalists had their cameras ready when Gergiev took the dais, welcoming the final mission's crew in his boisterous manner. "This lunar landing was made possible by our motherland's love of peace and both nations' exceptional scientific might!"

As usual, his address lauded Zirnitra's dignity. It apparently didn't matter whether Lyudmila or Demidov wrote the speeches. Lev absorbed it, then did as he was supposed to. After that, Nathan, Odette, and the other Arnackians were showered with applause by the attendees.

The send-off ended quickly and without issue. As Lev was about to leave the room, however, Demidov slid up to him—silent as a whisper—and handed him a piece of paper. "When you set foot on the moon, we'd like for these to be your first words."

Lev had known this was coming. He looked at the note. "*This one small step is a giant leap for the nations of East and West.*"

Like the planned flag-planting ceremony, this statement would promote the two superpowers' strength. Lev saw the achievement as a giant leap for *all* Earthlings, but he knew too well that Demidov wouldn't entertain that perspective. Rather than put up futile resistance and shake Demidov's trust, he decided to play the good, loyal dog.

Just then, Gergiev himself sauntered up and gripped Lev's shoulder, his eyes glowering down at the cosmonauts like rotting onions. "We're counting on you, Comrade Leps."

Lev smiled. "Understood, Comrade Gergiev."

While the Arnackian crew members were feted like foreign dignitaries, Lev and Irina slipped away to visit Korovin in the hospital. This wasn't an unauthorized visit; Lev had been careful to arrange it from the UK. He'd pointed out that this would be their last chance to visit Korovin before their mission, and the Zirnitran government had granted permission.

Korovin was in a room at the Military Institute of Medical Science under a fake name. When Lev and Irina entered, Korovin's daughter Xenia was already there. She was chatting with Roza, who had Dasha in her arms. Both women beamed at the sight of their friends. Lev had contacted them in advance to arrange to meet in Korovin's room. Xenia and Roza lived nearby, and Lev had heard that their households were supporting each other. For better or worse, they were linked by the tough experiences they'd gone through.

"Welcome back." Roza smiled at Irina. "But then, you'll be leaving again in just a few weeks, won't you?"

"Yes. We can't relax until we're back from the moon."

Lev and Irina were in fact so busy that they'd only have ten minutes with Korovin. After that, media obligations, an official press conference, and other duties filled their whole schedule.

Kneeling beside Korovin, Lev took his hand. "The spacecraft carrying your dreams will follow your plans exactly."

Korovin didn't respond. He'd grown so thin, he was little more than bones. His fingers had withered, and his skin was dry. A miraculous recovery seemed more and more like a long shot. Sadness filled Irina's face as she stood by his pillow.

Xenia leaned in, peering up at Lev. "Thanks so much for taking Dad to the moon with you!" There wasn't a hint of gloom in her rapid-fire speech.

"I hope he'll be happy with it. I just did what I could."

Roza frowned. "What're you talking about? You can't possibly put him aboard a spacecraft in this state."

Irina puffed with pride. "Lev convinced the Soyuz Special Committee to give the CSM the call sign 'Slava.'"

"Slava...? That's the Chief's name. Won't they be leaking confidential information?"

“Yes, Slava is his name, but it also means ‘glory,’” Lev pointed out. “If we lean into that meaning, we won’t reveal the Chief’s identity. That’s how I convinced the committee, anyway. I couldn’t stand the idea that Project Soyuz’s true leader wouldn’t be recognized. Now the mission control center and media will all name him without realizing it. At some point, they’ll even say, ‘Slava has entered lunar orbit!’”

Roza chuckled.

“I wish he could hear that himself,” said Irina. “Then again, if he was awake, I’m sure he’d refuse out of embarrassment.” She put a hand softly to Korovin’s head. “You’ll fly to the moon in your dreams. I’ve got your fare covered.”

Irina placed a copper coin on Korovin’s pillow and caressed it with a finger. It had been minted in 1943.



Lev knew they'd run out of time if they fell into small talk, so he got straight to business. "Can I take them off your hands now?" he asked Roza.

"Yes. They're light, so I assume they should be fine." She passed Lev the insignias that had once adorned Mikhail's uniform.

Each of the final mission's crew members was allowed to take a small bag onto the spacecraft and leave its contents on the moon. Lev didn't want to bring anything in particular, so he just had his family send a picture he'd drawn when he was five. It depicted lunar travel as he'd once imagined it. Irina wasn't visiting the lunar surface herself, so Lev would bring her bag for her. He still didn't know what she was leaving on the lunar surface; they hadn't talked about that yet. When he'd asked Xenia if she wanted him to bring anything, she'd replied, "The name Slava is more than enough."

Lev and Irina said their goodbyes to Roza and Xenia. Irina spoke gently to Dasha as Roza cradled her. "After we land on the moon and you grow up, people might be able to travel space freely. That's a little something for you to look forward to!"

Young Dasha still didn't understand speech, but she smiled brightly. Her tiny hands reached out for Irina, who took them with the tender smile of a mother.

Seeing that, Lev decided it was his job to dispel Irina's fears that her children were destined for lives of misfortune. He would protect them from the media and anyone trying to use them for propaganda. They had bigger priorities for now, but he'd give it more thought once they accomplished their mission.

As he left the room, he silently made a heartfelt promise to Korovin: *I'll fly with you to the moon and grasp the future with my own hands. Just watch me.*

Once Lev and his crewmates completed their duties in Sangrad, they moved to the snowy Albinar Cosmodrome. The first thing they did was plant elm saplings, as was now tradition.

Trees that marked previous missions grew along the road near

their accommodations, each a different height. Planting their saplings, Lev, Irina, and Nathan prayed the elms would survive the harsh weather and grow healthy and strong. When they finished, Lev touched Mikhail's tree. Its branches spread wide and thrust toward the sky.

"Your daughter's in fine health," he said, "and Roza gave me your insignias. I'll take them to the moon alongside your dreams."

Overwhelmed by the moment, Lev gazed at the elm trees. He hoped manned spaceflight would continue and that people from across the globe would launch from the Cosmodrome, so the line of elm trees would grow forever.

Final launch preparations began as soon as the crew checked into their accommodations. The three main members were put in quarantine. They'd only be allowed access to the hotel and training facilities; contact was restricted. The immune system weakened in outer space, so it was important to keep them away from bacteria and other germs that could cause infections. Everyone around them had received a flu shot, and interviews were conducted with a glass partition between the crew member and interviewer.

Quarantine was due to continue upon their return to Earth. After landing, they'd be handled as if they carried a deadly contagion. It was widely agreed that no pathogens existed on the harsh, barren lunar surface, but it was possible the crew *would* bring back something unknown, so they would stay in a special facility until their health was confirmed.

Nathan peered at their schedule. His face made it clear that he wasn't looking forward to the quarantine period. "To think that the surface of the moon we've been dreaming of could be infested by some unknown life-form... That sounds like something out of a bad science-fiction flick."

Lev chuckled. "Let's hope that plot stays in the movies."

As far as their photographs showed, the lunar surface held nothing but rocks. Still, who knew what they'd find once they saw it up close? The very thought came as thrill to Lev.

Even after quarantine began, Lev, Irina, and Nathan kept training normally. They jetted through the skies above the snowy desert in supersonic aircraft to keep their flying skills sharp. They confirmed flight schedule updates and pored over the necessary manuals. They

also stayed in good shape to ensure they could withstand their long journey.

On the other side of the globe, in Arnack, preparations proceeded smoothly for the lunar module's launch. The vessel was called "Laelaps" after one of the moon goddess Artemis's hunting dogs. Laelaps was known never to let prey escape. ANSA said the name reflected their hopes for a flawless lunar landing—as well as being a nod to the Queen's royal dogs.

Lev felt there was more to the name than the official statement. There was a biting irony there, as though the UK was about to take the dogs killed in Zirnitra's space experiments to the moon.

Albinar was a closed city, so while the crew resided there, the only exposure they had to the growing global excitement came from the news stories that reached them. Special programs were airing around the world, and more and more people were passionately studying space and the moon.

At the same time, protests in Arnack were growing even more heated. They were especially intense in New Marseille, the UK's space development holy ground. Protesters against space travel, dhampirs, and the UZSR called for strikes in the city streets. Meanwhile, some four thousand people—from politicians and scholars to reporters—gathered at the Manned Spacecraft Center. Things were supposed to intensify on the launch date, and both Arnack's government and ANSA had their guard up.

When Lev heard about the situation, part of him was glad the manned spacecraft would launch from Zirnitra. Nathan and Odette felt similarly. They didn't like the UZSR's lack of freedom, but they appreciated that it prevented interference.

That said, the media wasn't shut out of Albinar entirely. Project Soyuz was an international initiative with ground stations worldwide, so some information had to be public. If the final mission's crew was kept under wraps until the launch, the Union would be under fire for its strict secrecy. It would just increase the number of people who believed the previous spaceflights were fake.

To prevent that kind of blowback, the Zirnitran government allowed a special prelaunch press conference, although only approved reporters could attend.

On December 18, lunar module Laelaps launched successfully from Arnack, officially starting the final mission. Ensconced in its sturdy SLA—spacecraft lunar module adapter—the module headed toward lunar orbit. The very same day, Lev, Irina, and Nathan attended a press conference in a small hall in the Albinar Cosmodrome.

All three sat in a transparent plastic booth wearing medical masks, as per their quarantine conditions. There were no reporters in the hall with them; press attendees gathered one room over to avoid potentially transmitting illnesses. Their questions would be piped in.

Once the press conference began, Lev fielded general inquiries as captain. Nathan and Irina answered questions addressed specifically to them. The government had prescreened the reporters, so none represented tabloids or asked underhanded, lowbrow questions. The Delivery Crew would've pounced instantly on anyone attempting that.

Lev and the crew answered the unseen reporters as conscientiously as possible.

“What do you expect your lunar landing to achieve?”

“It’ll confirm the extent of our scientific development and technology and collect valuable data on an unexplored location.”

“Do you think we’ll build a space station on the lunar surface?”

“That’s impossible at present. It’ll be viable when space science advances, though.”

Questions and answers went back and forth until a slightly heavier question hit Lev. *“What’s the final mission’s chance of failure?”*

Since Lev couldn’t see the reporter who’d asked that, it felt a bit like the question had been posed by his reflection on the plastic booth’s wall.

“I haven’t weighed failure as an option,” he replied, confidence clear in his voice.

“You’re saying you guarantee success?”

“Success is all I envision. I’ll lead us to the lunar surface with my own hands.” He spoke resolutely, crushing the fears that resided deep within him.

“If the lunar module can’t reascend, won’t that strand you on the moon’s surface?”

“I don’t expect lunar takeoff to be a problem. Laelaps is a superb spacecraft built by Arnack.”

“You’re completely confident about every aspect of the mission?”

“That’s the result of our training.”

In truth, much remained uncertain. Lev wouldn’t know some details until the descent. He had to believe in himself, though—wavering confidence would mean poor decisions and potential failure.

“What will your first words be upon landing?”

“I haven’t decided. Even if I had, I wouldn’t share them now.”

Lev still didn’t know whether he’d say the line Demidov gave him. He wanted to say whatever felt natural in the moment.

The reporters turned their attention to Nathan.

“Some say you nominated yourself for the final mission out of ego.”

Nathan nodded. “I won’t deny that. I accept all criticism. But I’ll see my duties through as a representative of Arnack. And the truth is, far more people support me than criticize me.”

“That said, there’ve been whispers about your medical history, as well as the fact that you’re in your forties.”

“I don’t know who’s whispering, but our doctors gave my physical health their stamp of approval. As for my age, I work hard to keep up with younger crewmates.” Nathan’s unflappable attitude inspired Lev.

The next question was aimed at Irina. *“How do you feel about being the only crew member not stepping down on the moon?”*

Irina was calm from head to toe as she responded. “Someone was always going to have to stay with the CSM. That’ll be my responsibility. I’m looking forward to hearing about the lunar surface during our return trip.”

“If the lunar module can’t reascend, the human crew will be trapped on the moon. Only you, a vampire, will return to Earth. Have you considered such a tragedy?”

“No. My sights are set on our success, just like Lev. Should anything out of the ordinary occur, I’ll return to Earth per our mission guidelines.”

“You’d leave your crewmates for dead?”

“I would. That’s the responsibility I carry on my shoulders. I know harsh criticism would await me here. People would say things like, ‘It’s the vampire who should’ve died.’ I don’t care. If I feared criticism, I wouldn’t be a fit pilot. But I wouldn’t put up with people using our mission’s failure as an excuse to attack vampires indiscriminately. I’m sure people would do so, though. They’d be akin to a reporter who posed a question as if *hoping* a tragedy would occur.” Irina paused her rebuke for a moment, collecting herself. “Our mission will succeed, and all three of us will return. There’s no problem.”

The crewmates continued to emphasize success, and eventually the barbed questions stopped.

As the press conference neared its end, Lev spoke his parting words with great sincerity. “You only talked to three of us today, but Project Soyuz began a long time ago. It’s propped up by hundreds of thousands of people, as is this manned lunar landing. Our departure for the moon will be proof of their hard work. Please keep that in mind while writing about our mission.” He closed the conference coolly. “We’ll see you when we get back.”

As the SLA carried Laelaps into lunar orbit, snow fell around the Cosmodrome, sparkling like stardust. Engineers and technicians were hard at work preparing for the launch. In a small conference room at their hotel some five kilometers from the launch site, Lev, Irina, and Nathan underwent their final mission briefing.

Lev’s heart was racing. His relief that the end of their training was near clashed with his nervous anticipation for what came after. The launch was *tomorrow*. He longed for a sip of zhizni to calm his nerves, but unsurprisingly, he wasn’t allowed alcohol.

Glancing at Lev, Nathan rose from his seat. “I’m calling my family,” he announced. “See you two tomorrow.” With that, he left Irina and Lev alone.

Irina tidied her papers, then rested her head in her hands and gazed out the window. It was their last night on Earth. Lev wished they could talk on the roof, but the temperature outside was subzero. Subjecting their bodies to that stress so close to launch would be silly.

“Tomorrow’s the big day,” he said.

Irina turned to him, and he was bowled over by the emotion in her eyes. “It’s so strange,” she replied. “I thought I’d be nervous. Instead, I’m eerily calm.”

Lev put a hand to his chest, where his heart thumped nervously. “I, uh...don’t know if I’ll even be able to sleep tonight.”

“You were Mr. Confidence at the press conference,” Irina joked. “Really, though, how *are* you feeling about the lunar descent?”

“Honestly, I won’t know till we do it.” Lev had trained and studied so much that, when he closed his eyes, he saw the moon floating in the darkness. But the place was still such an open question. Objectively, he and Nathan felt the chance of a successful landing was fifty-fifty.

Irina stared at Lev for a moment. “You call yourself a captain? Show a little backbone. Promise me success.”

Whenever Lev showed doubt or uncertainty, Irina was always there to nudge him back on track. She’d done the same back when he took the cosmonaut candidate graduation exam. It was thanks to her that he’d reached this future.

“You’re right,” said Lev. “We’ll succeed.”

“You bet. I won’t stand for you forcing me to go home alone.”

Irina slowly took off her necklace. She placed it on the table, where it glittered beautifully. “I’m still not sure whether I want you to leave this on the moon for me. Back when I left Anival to become a test subject, I believed it really was a moonstone and that I’d take it there myself. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“If you ask me, it’d be better if you took it yourself someday.”

“Will that ‘someday’ ever arrive, though?”

At first, Lev wasn’t sure how to respond. At length, all he could do was answer honestly. “Perhaps in the future, when space development advances to the point that anyone can freely travel to the moon.”

Even if manned landings continued in Project Soyuz’s wake, it seemed unlikely that Irina would have another opportunity to join a lunar crew. They’d added her to this mission due to politicking; it was a special case. There would be no reason to fast-track her onto another flight while all the other cosmonauts waited their turn. Irina knew that

as well as Lev. It was the very reason she was on the fence.

Glancing down at her necklace, she fell into thought. A few minutes went by before she lifted her head with a relieved expression. “I’m not going to leave anything on the moon. I’ll keep this necklace and pray for the day mass lunar travel becomes a reality. I’m also keeping it because...it’s been passed down through the generations. Perhaps, one day, I’ll have someone to bequeath it to as well.”

For a moment, Lev wondered whether Irina meant her own offspring. *Wouldn’t she say that, if that’s what she means?* Perhaps she was being intentionally vague because she wanted leeway to give it to someone else. He didn’t push her for more. Neither he nor Irina knew what future awaited them upon their return or how they’d feel about it.

The only certainty was that they’d spend their lives together. Today, Lev had brought something to symbolize the promise they’d made. He wanted to give it to Irina before the launch, but it’d been hard to find a good opportunity in the middle of their preparations. Since Nathan had been kind enough to give Lev the chance he needed, Lev wouldn’t let it slip from his grasp. As Irina put her necklace back on, he sat up straight. “I know this is a bit sudden, but I want to give you something.”

“What is it?”

He took a small case from his pocket, setting it in front of her. “When I saw Bart and Kaye’s rings, I thought you should have something similar.”

“Wait. Is this...?”

“Yes. It’s a ring. Setting aside whether we marry, it’s...proof of the promise we made each other.”

Irina flushed. “Um... Can I...open it?”

Lev smiled and nodded.

Irina picked up the case as though handling a precious jewel. When she opened it and took the ring out, however, she cocked her head quizzically. “There’s no stone.” She checked the case, but the stone wasn’t inside.

“I want to give you a moon rock,” Lev explained gently.

Irina gasped. “You’ll bring me one?”

“Yes. But once we get back to Earth, it’ll become state property. It’ll only be part of your ring during the mission.”

Irina’s eyes welled with tears. “That’s more than long enough.”

In terms of visual charm, any jewel on Earth would be more beautiful. Moon rocks were essentially just dull stone. Yet to Lev and Irina, nothing was more precious, so Lev felt nothing was more suitable. When he saw Irina’s smile, he knew he’d made the right call.

“Is it the right or left hand in Anival?” he asked.

“Right.”

Taking Irina’s hand, Lev slid the ring onto her ring finger.

“Thank you.” Irina’s lips trembled as she tried to control her joy, instinctively hiding her bashfulness behind an impudent stare. “Are you aware that, if you bring a moon rock onto the ship, it may combust as soon as it’s exposed to oxygen?”

“It might even carry unknown microorganisms,” Lev shot back.

“It might be toxic.”



Their eyes met, and the cosmonauts chuckled.

“We’ll find out for certain on this adventure.”

“Get me a moon rock, Lev,” Irina commanded, eyes still teary.
“That’s my mission for you.”

“I promise I’ll succeed.”

“That’s the spirit.” Placing the ring back in its case, she wrapped her hands around Lev’s. “I’m scared and worried,” she admitted. “But I think I can do this if I’m with you.”

“You don’t even have to think about it,” Lev insisted. “You can, and you will.”

“You’re right. I will.”

The warmth of Irina’s hands flowed into Lev’s heart. He’d done everything he set out to do. All that was left now was the final mission.

Dawn was a deep purple, and the UK’s and UZSR’s flags fluttered in the air. It was perfect weather for a launch—no strong winds or snow.

Lev, Irina, and Nathan woke at four that morning to prep for their nine-thirty launch. They were served an Arnackian breakfast: steak and eggs. Lev took his time savoring the meat, readying himself for a whole week of space food. Unfortunately, eating something so greasy in the morning left him dealing with heartburn.

Nathan chuckled. “It’s a good-luck custom, but it’s certainly not good for the body.”

Irina poked her steak, dissatisfied. “Both your countries’ superstitions are completely unbelievable.”

The UZSR did have its own unique customs, and the cosmonauts didn’t snub them. Each wrote their name and the date on their hotel door, as many others had before.

LEV LEPS, DECEMBER 21, 1969

When Lev finished, he glanced at the past cosmonauts’ names. They’d all endeavored to explore an unknown world, and their passion

defied the passage of time.

Next, the crew received the customary prelaunch blessing. Nine years ago, the priest hadn't known Irina was a vampire. Now he did, and after some trepidation, he drenched her in holy water.

"What's even the point of all this?" Irina muttered, her face and hair soaked.

By six o'clock, Lev's crew had finished their physicals. They pulled on space suits to protect their bodies from the air pressure during launch; beneath the suits, sensors had been placed on their bodies. Lev placed the ivy keepsake from Irina in his shoulder pocket to keep it close. Their space suits would be airtight once fully sealed. The crew would rely on oxygen from their life-support systems, and they could only converse via radio transmissions.

They'd completed the assigned launch preparations, but the bus stopped on its way to the launch site so they could observe another old tradition.

Irina couldn't hide her disdain. She refused to meet Lev's eyes. "Hurry up and get it over with."

"We'll be back soon," he muttered.

Although Lev felt sheepish and apologetic, he left the bus with Nathan. After all the effort they'd gone through to don their suits, they took a few pieces off. Shivering, they stood by a bus tire to urinate. Partially removing their space suits wasn't an issue—there'd be a final check before launch. Regardless, this was a strange tradition. When they finished, Nathan shot Lev a perplexed look. "So, uh...I hear *you* started this particular custom."

"For the record, I never thought it'd become a ritual." He still couldn't believe it.

As they got back on the bus, a hint of loneliness flashed across Nathan's face. "I hope that wasn't the last time we'll observe that tradition."

"This isn't the end," Lev assured him. "It's a new beginning."

His hope was groundless, but it brought a smile to Nathan's face. "Then let's do it in New Marseille next time. I thought I'd freeze to death."

The snowfields were carpets of pure white, and the sun rising

slowly on the horizon dyed them orange. In that stunning natural environment, the giant rocket pointing straight toward the heavens looked utterly out of place.

Arriving at the launch site, Lev's crew gazed up at the rocket that would blast them into the sky. It was still covered in ice. Emblazoned down the rocket's sides were the two nations' names and flags, and atop the rocket was *Slava*, the vessel that would guide everyone to glory.

A number of people were visiting the launch site to see off the crew's historic flight. Although Albinar was freezing cold, the fire of their passion warmed it today. As photographers snapped pictures of the astronauts, Lev looked around. He couldn't see Gergiev or Demidov. They might be watching from afar, probably from somewhere more comfortable.

Lt. Gen. Viktor barked an order to those gathered. "Comrades! Arnackians too! The send-off! Take your seats!"

This was also customary. The Arnackians watched in confusion but followed along, kneeling before quickly standing again.

"Ready for launch!"

At Lt. Gen. Viktor's words, those gathered burst into applause. Lev didn't know that tradition's full history or meaning, but it sank deep into his heart. As Nathan had, he hoped this wasn't the last time they observed the ritual.

Lev led the crew toward the elevator. In the past, he and Irina had made this walk separately. As local media snapped their photos, it struck him that today they were making it *together*. Their Arnackian crewmate—a former rival—received enthusiastic applause and waved in response.

This wasn't a secret launch, like in the past. And it was no longer part of a "race." The world had changed. Lev felt that in his bones as he stepped aboard the elevator. Their helmets silenced the sounds around them, but the elevator rumbled through their bodies as it rose.

Lev recalled his previous spaceflight. Back then, Irina had lied to him. With how worried he was, achieving his dream had been joyless. This time, too, he felt only a sense of duty.

The elevator finally stopped at the tip of the rocket, and the crew stepped out. Lev gazed down at the world around them. Everything

looked so small. He bid a brief farewell to the planet, burning the morning sun's beauty into his heart and mind.

We'll return as heroes.

With that thought in his heart, Lev stepped into the clean room attached to Slava, where launch engineers readied the crew for boarding. Meanwhile, the two backup crew members—Odette and Stepan—peeked out from inside the craft. They'd entered the CSM earlier to run a complete systems check, a list of more than four hundred items.

Lev entered Slava at seven o'clock. Inside, a stuffed black dragon and a Kukushka toy dangled together like best friends. There was a row of three seats; Lev's was on the far left. Stepan and the engineers strapped him in, hooking his suit up to oxygen and comms. When they finished, Stepan patted Lev's shoulder and flashed a smile. Lev returned it with a grin.

Irina entered next, sitting in the rightmost seat. Odette pumped her fists in a show of support, and Irina made an adorable attempt to do the same despite her awkward, unwieldy space suit. Finally, Nathan entered and took his place in the center.

Preparations were complete. As the communication systems geared up, a voice from the cosmodrome's blockhouse came through. *"This is Albinar. Do you copy?"*

"This is Lev aboard Slava. I hear you loud and clear."

Stepan, Odette, and the engineers accompanying them said a quick prayer for success, then left. The clean room was folded and removed, and Slava's entry hatch closed. The vessel now housed only the crewmates attempting the world's first manned lunar landing. All three were confident and believed in each other, having formed a bond of trust that went beyond words.

The first manned spaceflight in history had circled the globe for just 108 minutes. Today's rocket was a hundred times more powerful, and its journey would last over a week, covering a total of 780,000 kilometers.

"Our comrades already paved the road to the moon," Lev told his crewmates. "Let's take it easy."

"Good call," Nathan said, checking his space suit. "Better not

concentrate so hard we exhaust ourselves early.”

“I didn’t even have anyone to talk to on my first trip,” Irina said wearily. “I’ll be the life of the party on this mission!”

“All right, let’s do those checks.”

At Lev’s order, they jumped into their final inspection.

“*Enter verb seventy-five. Stand by,*” the ground control officer directed. Communications with the cosmodrome would continue right up until launch.

“Roger.” Nathan fed the command into DSKY. “Verb seventy-five. Stand by.”

As they prepped the required sequences, blastoff approached. Slava would leave Earth in three minutes. Television specials were covering the launch worldwide, with viewers on the edge of their seats. No doubt the protests had intensified too. Yet none of that excitement or anger permeated the spacecraft. The crew proceeded calmly through their prelaunch checklist with ground control, exactly as they had while training. There was no panic or worry whatsoever. Lev’s heart swelled with excitement, but his mind remained calm.

“*Is your bus connected correctly?*” the officer asked from the cosmodrome.

“Bus connected,” Irina replied, completely collected.

The launch countdown started.

“*Twenty. Fifteen.*”

Tension leaked into the ground control officer’s voice. The rocket’s ignition sequence began.

“*Ten. Nine. Eight...*”

The intense sound of the engines blasting engulfed the crew’s bodies and set fire to their souls. All of them had long dreamed of this moment.

“*Five. Four...*”

The rocket lifted. Lev’s heart pumped even faster.

“*Three. Two... Ignition!*”

“Ignition confirmed!” Lev exclaimed. “Come on! Let’s do this!”

All engines engaged. The roar pierced their bodies with energy

tantamount to a nuclear reaction. The craft shook wildly. Brilliant sunlight shone through the windows as the rocket shuddered into the sky, and Earth's gravity pulled down on them. All systems were good, data was within normal ranges, and Slava was launching in the correct direction.

"Roll program confirmed!" Lev said.

"*Roll complete,*" replied ground control.



The rocket sped up, tearing away from the ground. As it neared outer space, the shaking increased. Two minutes and forty seconds into launch, the first stage rocket finished its burn.

“Staging...ignition.”

The second stage rocket kicked in, giving them even more thrust. The sound was like thunder, and strong tremors continued to shake Slava.

“*Thrust good,*” ground control reported. “*All engines functioning well.*”

“Roger. Comms clear.”

The crew felt their bodies crushed under the gravity trying to prevent them from leaving their home.

“Look,” Irina said. “It’s Earth.”

Out the window, the vast planet spread before their eyes, but there wasn’t time to admire the view. This wasn’t a Mechta cabin; the crew couldn’t simply sit around inside. They had to watch data outputs, monitor the HGC, and ensure that no problems occurred midflight. They continued updating the blockhouse, and twelve minutes into launch, the dragon and Kukushka toys floated into the air.

“*This is Albinar,*” came the message from Earth. “*Slava has entered orbit.*”

Dust sparkled around the crew. Released from the gravity they were accustomed to, their limbs grew weightless. Lev had long forgotten that sensation, and exhilaration washed over him.

“Whoa...” Irina murmured in awe.

Her reaction brought tears to Lev’s eyes. She was no longer a test subject hidden by the state. He was beyond glad she could finally visit space as a representative of Earth.

“*Hey, Nathan, how’s your first trip to space?*”

The question from the blockhouse caught Nathan off guard. He cleared his throat, thinking for a moment. “A million times better than the vomit comet.” Despite his sarcasm, his tone betrayed the thrill of it all—this experience had moved Nathan too.

The blue-and-green Earth below was such a special thing, yet they were only a hundred kilometers from its surface. Past the atmosphere

was the endless darkness of space. In Earth orbit, the crew would inspect their craft's machinery and systems. Then they'd leave as scheduled on the first-ever 380,000-kilometer journey to the moon.

Before New Marseille took over communications from Albinar, Zirnitra's ground control team sent a message of encouragement. *"Comrades from home and the West! We wish you all a safe journey from our motherland—the Earth!"*

"Thank you! We'll ensure your hard work pays off!" Lev's voice radiated confidence.

Moments later, control transferred to New Marseille's mission control center. *"This's New Marseille. Slava, do you copy?"* The voice was none other than Bart's brother.

"This is Lev Leps aboard Slava. We read you loud and clear."

"This is Aaron Fifield. It's my pleasure to guide your journey to the moon." Aaron was serving as CAPCOM, so his was the only voice they'd hear for a while.

When Lev closed his eyes, he could picture the theater-like control center full of young, passionate officers. He knew Bart and Kaye were hard at work. "Our regards to everyone in New Marseille," he said, his voice bright and lively.

After some time in Earth orbit, the crew's physical condition changed. The blood and fluids gravity usually pulled down their bodies moved to their heads and chests, their pulses strengthened, and they felt as if their organs were floating freely. It wasn't particularly pleasant, and all they could do was wait until they adjusted.

"I think I'm a little spacesick," Irina mumbled.

"Guess the fun's just beginning," Nathan said wryly.

Headaches and nausea had hit previous missions' crews a few hours into flight, reportedly worsening in lunar orbit. Lev hoped *his* crew's queasiness would stay slight. He wanted to be in the best condition possible when they finally tackled the lunar descent and landing.

He couldn't fret over his physical state. Earth orbit was part of the flight, and the crew had jobs to do. Lev carefully checked data and confirmed communications with ground stations on Earth.

"You'll lose the Sayanask ground station in one minute," CAPCOM

warned. *“Fifty-nine minutes postlaunch, you’ll begin comms through Hoshimachi.”*

Hoshimachi signaled them on schedule.

“Raise the volume on the Hoshimachi S-band,” CAPCOM directed.

“Roger.” Irina did so, then said to no one in particular, “Hoshimachi, huh? That brings back memories.”

During their trip around the world, she and Lev had visited quite a few cities that now hosted ground stations, including Hoshimachi. They both remembered the place; when Lev closed his eyes, he could picture the residents’ smiling faces. They had been very curious about Irina and welcomed her warmly, much to the vampire’s relief. In Hoshimachi, Lev and Irina gave a speech entitled “Prepare for Space Travel!” Afterward, they signed autographs and posed for photos with kids, and a few local junior high students told the cosmonauts they wanted to work in space development. Lev had no doubt that they were watching this mission with elation. It was up to his crew to pass the space-travel baton to the future and ensure they didn’t render the cosmonauts’ speech in Hoshimachi a lie.

They lost Hoshimachi’s signal in about five minutes and switched to the next ground station. One and a half orbits later, the crew had completed their system check and were ready for the next phase.

“This’s New Marseille,” said CAPCOM. *“Proceed to trans-lunar injection. Over.”*

“Roger.”

It was time to ready the third stage ignition that would free them from Earth’s gravitational pull. This task was important—and potentially fatal if something went wrong. Past missions’ success and the crew’s experience kept everyone calm as they prepared the engine according to a computer-calculated time frame. The crewmates watched the time on the DSKY display and their watches, which were designed to work in space.

“One minute to ignition,” said CAPCOM. *“All systems running.”*

“Roger,” replied Irina.

Nathan gestured at Lev; they were good to go.

“Ignition!” Lev exclaimed.

“Ignition!” Irina repeated, hitting a switch. Slava shook as the rocket blasted ahead.

“*Ignition confirmed.*” Detailed data on the ignition conditions traveled to the ground, and a minute later, CAPCOM relayed another confirmation. “*Thrust, trajectory, guidance—everything looks good.*”

“Wonderful!” Irina said.

Lev glanced at her, feeling a bit cheeky. “Pilot, do I need to remind you that this is just the beginning?”

“Think I don’t know that, Captain?” she shot back.

“Let’s monitor the engines,” Nathan said, bringing them back to the task at hand.

As their speed rose to 11.2 kilometers per second, the crew gave mission control status updates, confirming data as required. The rocket’s thrust stopped at five minutes and forty seconds, and Lev requested a status update. “How are we looking, New Marseille?”

“*You’re en route to the moon, Slava. Great job.*”

“Thanks. On to the moon.”

The crew had cleared the first major hurdle. They no longer needed the third stage rocket, so Irina jettisoned it, and it disappeared into the depths of space. Their task was now to revise the flight path as needed while progressing to the lunar orbit insertion phase. The next two days would be relatively safe and easy. In fact, they were scheduled to participate in a live television broadcast.

Most importantly, they could take off their space suits—although that’d be *very* difficult. It was hard enough on Earth, and zero gravity would make it even more challenging. They couldn’t move as freely, and they wouldn’t be removing pieces in exactly the same order they’d donned them. When they pushed the spacecraft walls to reposition themselves, they sometimes went the wrong way. On top of that, any space suit parts they let go of were left floating in space.

Despite using all her strength, Irina couldn’t take her glove off. “Come on, you damn—whoa!” She’d freed her arm, but she tumbled straight into Nathan. “Whoops! Sorry!”

Nathan, blindsided, let go of a fastening. “Ah! Watch out, Lev!”

The fastening hurtled toward Lev’s face.

“Wha—?!” Lev yelped, throwing his hands up to cover his face as the fastening whooshed across the ship. “Please be careful, guys.”

Switching from space suits to jumpsuits took them two sweaty hours. They folded the space suits neatly, then placed them in a dedicated chamber under their seats where the equipment wouldn’t be damaged.

Lev took a deep breath. They’d only gotten changed, yet it had felt like a full body workout. “Finally free,” he said with a relieved sigh. “That was way harder than I expected.”

The battle to remove their suffocating space suits brought on another bout of space sickness. All their wonder and awe from arriving in space had been sucked away. Their nausea and dull, throbbing headaches sent a message loud and clear: Humanity had evolved for life on Earth, not in the stars.

Getting changed wasn’t the only ordinary chore that proved surprisingly difficult. Even preparing meals was a three-person job. In order to make soup, Lev held the space food bags, Nathan opened them with scissors, and Irina rehydrated the contents with water from a specially designed pistol. The meal hardly warranted the effort they’d put in—the soup was less a liquid and more a slimy, half-solid blob floating in midair, waiting for them to snap it up like fish. The rest of their food would mostly be solids, and when they were thirsty, they had to point the water pistol carefully into their mouths. One mistake, and they’d squirt water right into their own faces.

Squeezing a tube of coffee into his mouth, Lev wondered what his childhood self would’ve made of learning that life in space was an endless series of struggles. Would he still have reached for the stars, or would the mystique have faded? Mulling it over, he turned to look out the window.

“Wow.” He had no words for the sight before him. Earth arced like a giant bow, slowly growing into a sphere before his eyes. He’d seen it in photographs, but that was nothing like viewing it in person. It was even more beautiful than he’d imagined, and their struggles seemed to disappear into the far reaches of the galaxy.

Slava got farther and farther from Earth, flying over ten kilometers per second, but the crew had no sense of motion. There was no sound of wind, and out the window, they saw only darkness. No outward sign indicated the speed they traveled at—only Earth growing

ever smaller and the moon growing ever larger.

After trans-lunar injection, the invisible pull of Earth's gravity gradually reduced Slava's speed. Although scientists had accounted for that, it showed that the flight to the moon wasn't just a journey to an unknown land. It was also a fight to escape the cradle of Earth.

Slava rotated 0.3 degrees per second so that its surface received an equal amount of heat from the direct sunlight. The computer fortunately handled that, which reduced Irina's workload, since she was responsible for regulating the craft.

Irina floated around inspecting Slava, then reported to mission control. "New Marseille, there are no problems with any mechanical systems."

"Roger," CAPCOM replied. *"Data readings are also nominal."* Mission control worked in shifts, so the CAPCOM role had passed from Aaron to Zhores Rimsky.

Irina's hands were full outside inspections too. Her responsibilities to ensure a safe flight included quietly charging batteries, monitoring the air conditioning and wastewater systems, sterilizing drinking water, and setting up for meals.

Lev and Nathan helped when she was especially busy. They also went over the descent phase. Lev now knew the lunar surface better than any city on Earth, and he'd memorized the descent procedure completely, but that didn't stop him from running through the details over and over to ensure everything went according to plan.

Eleven hours postlaunch, the crew's first day ended, and they got ready to sleep in a world where night and day didn't exist. They had to be prepared for anything, so one crew member would be on call. Today, Irina had that job. She strapped herself into her seat to nap, donning her headset in case an emergency transmission came in. Meanwhile, Lev and Nathan pulled sleeping bags from under their seats.

"Sorry, Irina," said Lev.

"I'll get what rest I need tomorrow." She grinned. "Sleep well." After that, she checked the stars' positions with Slava's sextant, getting ready for flight path revisions.

Lev looked out the window to see how far they'd come. The spherical Earth was now small enough to fit within the window frame.

“It really is round,” he whispered.

Seeing the blue seas and white South Pole against the stark black backdrop, Lev felt a sudden pang of loneliness, as though he’d lost something precious. That sphere floating in the vastness of space was such a fragile, fleeting thing. Nuclear war would destroy it instantly.

“Not going to sleep, Lev?” Irina stirred Lev from his thoughts.

“Sorry,” he said. “Thanks for doing the first watch, Irina. Night.”

Slipping into his sleeping bag, he closed his eyes. It was strange to lie there with no pressure on his body, much like drifting at sea. He felt as if he were nestled inside a chrysalis.

His gaze followed the route to the lunar surface on the backs of his eyelids. Just as he was about to land, he fell into slumber.

“*This’s New Marseille. Good morning, everyone.*” The first comms message marked the start of a new day.

“This is Irina. Good morning. How’s the system data look?”

“Good. *We’ll update the flight plan when you’re ready.*”

Lev had slept a full eight hours, but he didn’t feel fully rested. It hadn’t been a blissful, deep slumber—he’d struggled with Slava’s cramped confines. Nathan was in the same boat; he let out a big, tired yawn. It would take ages to make long spaceflights comfortable.

The second workday aboard Slava was like the first. The crew followed their detailed schedule, Lev and Nathan again reviewing the lunar descent procedure while Irina focused on maintenance.

To keep their spirits up as they worked, the crew could listen to cassettes. Project Soyuz personnel had provided them with a tape player, since long periods in suffocating spaces were bad for one’s mental health. The tapes they’d sent included hits from Arnack and Zirnitra, classical music, and a collection of environmental recordings.

Past missions’ crews had favored the latter, so Lev’s team chose one of those first. The familiar sounds brought Slava to life: traffic, bells, shuffling crowds, animal calls and birdsong, crashing waves, flowing rivers. The interwoven ambient noise calmed Lev. “I’m not sure

how else to put this,” he said, “but this has me feeling nostalgic.”

Nathan nodded. “Even the car horns sound surprisingly good.”

“I like the rivers,” Irina said.

Nothing about the environmental recordings bothered them, so the crew pretty much set the other tapes aside, letting the sounds of their planet accompany them most of the day.

Eventually, Slava hit the point where its crew had to choose whether to revise the flight plan. Three celestial bodies—the moon, Earth, and sun—were pulling on the vessel. It was essentially a straight line from Earth to the moon, but spacecraft often drifted off course.

“You’ll need to make a slight revision,” mission control said.

Slava was 200,000 kilometers from Earth, traveling 1.5 kilometers per second. The crew would use an engine thrust to course correct and put the craft back on an approved route. They began their preparations with the help of the sextant, then adjusted Slava’s roll, pitch, and yaw—angling the craft front-to-back and side-to-side, and spinning it on its center axis—based on mission control’s reaction control system data.

“Roll 096. Pitch 356. Yaw 018,” mission control said.

“Roll 096. Pitch 356. Yaw 018. Confirmed,” Nathan echoed.

Once he’d typed in the data, Irina set the retrorockets. “Ignition.”

A few seconds later, Lev updated the mission control center. “New Marseille, burn complete.”

Slava’s crew had worked in total harmony, and the flight continued smoothly on the path both nations had paved over the past nine years.

After their unappetizing space lunch, it was time for the crew’s main task of the day. They’d been asked to give a live forty-minute broadcast 240,000 kilometers from Earth. A ground station network would put Slava’s video data through a complicated processing and relay system, then send it to various nations.

Lev, Nathan, and Irina donned their headsets, set up the broadcast, and began filming. To kick things off, Lev pointed the camera at the window, showing Earth floating in space.

“Wow! That’s breathtaking,” said Aaron Fifield, the crew’s cohost on Earth. Knowing they were on television, he’d dropped his reserved

demeanor as CAPCOM, replacing it with excitement intended to entertain the audience. *“The colors are wonderful! Is that Earth?”*

“Indeed it is,” Lev replied. “It’s the planet you live on from a 240,000-kilometer distance.”

In a measured, polite tone, Lev described the white clouds trailing across Earth’s sky and the ice of the south pole. He pointed out vast tropical rainforests and barren deserts. He didn’t know how people were reacting in their homes, but he felt sure they were glued to their screens, captivated by the place they called home.

After shooting footage of Earth for about ten minutes, Lev turned the camera on Slava’s interior. The Zirnitran military had ordered them not to film that, on the grounds that they’d be leaking confidential information, but Lev decided to do so anyway. He’d even prepared an excuse in case he was reprimanded: *“I couldn’t handle the camera in zero gravity.”* If anyone objected, Lev was ready to throw them in the vomit comet and let them experience those conditions themselves.

“Allow me to introduce our crew.” Lev focused on Irina first. “This is Slava’s pilot, Irina Luminesk. She’s from Lilitto. As I’m sure you all know, she was the world’s first cosmonaut!”

Irina, looking nervous, held a spoon in one hand and a water pistol in the other. “People of Earth, I will now perform a magic trick!”

The water she fired from the pistol bubbled out and floated in front of her. She stopped it with her spoon, then turned it upside down to show the spoon and water bubble hovering in the air. This would be the first time the people of Earth witnessed zero gravity.

Irina struck a satisfied pose, spreading her arms wide in triumph. “What do you think? That wasn’t a real magic trick, actually—anyone in space could do it.”

This “magic trick” had been Irina’s idea, and Lev had never asked why she wanted to perform it. Watching her now, he guessed that she wanted to show people two things: how fun space could be and that vampires weren’t scary.

After the magic trick, Lev pivoted to Nathan. “Next up is Nathan Louis, the leader of all ANSA’s cosmonauts. He’s representing Arnack, and he’ll be piloting the Laelaps lunar module.”



Nathan beamed at the camera. “I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to give up after I fell ill. But I didn’t,” he said with great confidence. “I met a boy with an unbreakable spirit who inspired me to keep going. I may be an old man, but here’s what an old man can do when he puts his mind to it.”

With that, Nathan began a zero-gravity acrobatics exhibition. He braced his feet on the ceiling and drifted toward the floor, flipping in ways that were impossible on Earth. Lev knew it would delight the boy Nathan had met in the hospital. He hoped it would also inspire those aware of the man’s past.

Finally, Nathan gobbled a tube of borscht. “Mm. Delicious!” He grinned. “When we get home, there’s nothing I want more than a real bowl of piping-hot borscht. Now, it’s about time we get some coverage of the borscht nation’s hero.” Nathan took the camera and pointed it toward Lev. “Say hello to Captain Lev Leps, the man who will take the first steps on the moon.”

Lev smiled. “Good morning, day, and evening, people of Earth! We’re approaching the moon at 1.3 kilometers per second.”

He couldn’t see or hear anyone watching, but Lev believed everyone following the mission would love this peek into their journey through space.

Interlude 5

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ERVOUS TENSION filled the Hoshimachi Astronomical Observatory as the staff received video footage from space. Watching it, Misa was so awed and excited she could barely sit still.

Her dream had come true—yet it was a responsibility that weighed heavily on her, not the cloud-nine bliss she'd expected. A month earlier, after a change in schedule, ANSA had asked Hoshimachi's observatory to track the lunar descent *and* process the live broadcast. In one fell swoop, they had appointed the observatory the main ground station.

That was a huge role. Depending on the timing of the lunar descent, Hoshimachi might receive and broadcast the footage of the first steps taken on the moon.

Participating in a historic moment was a huge honor. Misa clapped her hands together in prayer, hoping Slava wouldn't run into issues that threw it off schedule.

Please, everyone, land on the moon and come home safely.

When Queen Sundancia of Arnack saw Earth on her television and recognized the blue globe floating in space as her home, she was overcome with such emotion that tears streamed down her cheeks. *Please let cooperative development become a symbol of peace*, she prayed into the vast depths of space.

After Mission 2, a Soyuz Special Committee member belonging to an organization called the NWO had contacted Arnack's royal family. The committee member spoke of a "new world order" and a peaceful future, but Sundancia wasn't ready to trust them.

When she heard the UK and UZSR would leave their flags on the moon, she'd wanted to oppose the decision—wouldn't it breach the Outer Space Treaty? Both governments were in agreement, however, and the queen didn't have input.

Sundancia valued peace over conquest. She'd recorded that perspective on the silicon disk Slava's crew would leave on the moon. The queen also intended to voice it at the event commemorating their safe return. She'd speak to the people of all nations, not just her own subjects, and emphasize that they could never again lose so many lives to a tragic war. Just as she had during the 21st Century Expo, she would suggest they make the future a bright one. If the NWO planned conflict and discord, she'd stand against them. Regardless of whether the lunar landing upset the order of the world, her responsibilities as queen of a global superpower would remained unchanged.

She thought of Lev, who bore the pressure of being the first person on the moon. During the 21st Century Expo conference, she'd been timid and cowardly, only finding courage and strength after meeting Lev, Irina, and others her own age. With those memories in mind, Sundancia prayed this lunar landing would be a step toward a better future for people around the world.

Professor Klaus took a break from watching Slava's spaceflight, stepping outside the control center for some fresh air. He looked at the sky and squinted in the strong sun, picturing Slava en route to meet Laelaps in lunar orbit.

Klaus had sold his soul for the sake of his dream to develop rockets. Not a day went by that he didn't regret sullyng his hands with tactical missile design. He'd never be rid of his past; people would condemn his war crimes as long as he lived. He had hidden those crimes to cross over to the UK, where he appeared on television, doing everything he could to enlighten people about the wonders of space development.

This day had taken twenty years to arrive. Before long, the people of Earth would achieve one of their first major goals. Next, they'd set their sights on Mars, and after that, destinations farther off.

The bright, talented youngsters who'd convinced Klaus to accept a lunar orbit rendezvous were sure to carry the torch of space development into the future. Manned spaceflight after Project Soyuz was still an open question, but Klaus believed the final mission's success

would touch hearts around the globe.

Turning east, Klaus sent a silent message across the sea to a singular comrade in the UZSR. *Chief Designer, are you looking at this same sky? I believe you're an individual, not an organization or group. Perhaps we're about the same age. I hope we finally meet when rivalry between East and West truly ends. If we do, I pray that you—Slava's designer—will at least tell me your name.*

The hospital room was quiet. Moonlight filtered through the curtains, and a copper coin on the bedside table glimmered. The esteemed scientist in the sickbed floated through the eternity of space in the midst of a dream. He entrusted his goals for space to the world; though his body was deteriorating, his fiery passion blazed on.

On the military research laboratory's roof, arctic winds howled. A girl wrapped in a fur blanket shivered as she stared at the moon. She'd been denied contact with Lev and Irina for her crimes; she couldn't even send them letters due to the recent samizdat. Still, she believed that one day they'd meet again.

"Lev, Irina... Thank you so much for that stunning footage of Earth." Anya held a glass of soda water to the moon in a toast. "When you get back, we'll celebrate with aspic and nastoyka."

Her soda water sparkled in the moonlight, its bubbles bright as stardust.



The residents of Lev's hometown gathered around a single television. Lev's parents were there, watching their son travel the vast depths of space. It was like something out of a dream.

"We'll close this live broadcast with one last look at Earth," Lev said. *"See you when we're closer to the moon!"*

As the broadcast ended, the townspeople burst into applause. A television crew on-site recorded them cheering and passing around glasses of zhizni. Lev's father told a story about his beloved son as a foolish youth. The boy loved the skies so much, he'd made wings out of sticks and sheets, jumping from their roof and injuring himself.

Lev's mother admitted that she'd scared him with tales of vampires to keep him in line. "I must apologize to Irina and everyone in Anival," she concluded with a guilty smile.

When Mission 4 ended, Lev—who'd returned to Zirnitra after training in Arnack—had sent his parents a letter that read, *"I'm going to Anival, so unfortunately, I can't come home now. I promise to visit once I determine whether there's a vampire nest on the moon. I'll bring Irina."*

He'd enclosed two hand-drawn tickets to the moon in the letter. They were valid for a hundred years.

"We'll be long gone by then!" Lev's father said with a hearty laugh.

Evening mist settled over the plaza where Anival's red-eyed, fanged residents gathered. Ever since a Zirnitran soldier had informed them that Irina was en route to the moon, the villagers had held nightly celebrations, praying for her success.

Anyuta told the children of the village about Irina's youth. She described how Irina stared at the evening sky, whispering the poem of the moon. She'd read books and let her imagination go wild; she'd made up her own lunar mythology, sharing it with Anyuta. Irina's lone hope had been the moon glimmering in the sky, so very far from Earth. After

losing her parents, she'd believed it a resting place for the souls of the lost. Eventually, Irina had left the secluded village she called home, choosing to live among humans. She'd discovered new hopes and dreams and met someone who understood her.

"Irina's name means 'peace.' She's sure to bring us that very thing, along with a completely new world," Anyuta said.

Everyone in Anival looked toward the sky, praying the moon goddess would protect Irina.

Chapter 11: The Lunar Landing

Indigo Eyes

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HE LONGER LEV SPENT in zero gravity, the more he forgot his own weight, losing his sense of how his limbs had felt on Earth. His space sickness vanished as his mind and body adapted.

There was no sunrise or sunset, only constant sunlight. Stars glimmered in an endlessly dark sea. Earth was the size of a marble, and there was something very lonely about it.

Three days postlaunch, Slava was 315,000 kilometers from Earth. The planet's gravitational pull restricted their speed to 3,200 kilometers per hour. Then a slight tremor struck Lev—a “pop” akin to breaking through water, although no such barriers existed in space.

That was the instant Slava broke free of Earth's gravity. Completely removed from the planet, the craft picked up speed as lunar gravity drew it in. The moon outside the window was like a floating concrete ball. As they grew closer, it eclipsed their every thought.

Soon after, the crew hit the next flight path checkpoint. There were no data issues, and reorientation wasn't necessary. Slava hadn't had any problems so far, and its flight continued smoothly—so smoothly that Lev couldn't help wondering whether the computer was functioning without errors, if a concealed screw had loosened, if there was a fuel leak, if the mission control center had hit a snag CAPCOM hadn't mentioned, and so on.

All of it was simply paranoia. Lev had so much time to sit and think, his imagination was digging for doubts. He brushed them away while Irina inspected the ship beside him, prompting him to review the descent plan for Mare Tranquillitatis.

Descent wasn't the only aspect he contemplated. He ran a mental simulation of their return from the lunar surface, typing the ascent command into DSKY, then hitting the button to return them to Slava. The bolts connecting the ascent stage and descent stage would release,

the engine would fire, and they'd blast off.

How will pressing that button feel? Lev wondered. Would he be reluctant to leave, or want nothing more than to go home? In truth, he realized, he wouldn't know for certain until the moment was upon him.

The spaceflight entered its fourth day. Slava's crew had actually lost all sense of time, since they lacked a night-and-day cycle, but they used Earth time as a standard. The safest part of their flight was ending as the mission's next phase—lunar orbit insertion—neared.

Lev, Irina, and Nathan were working when the light level they were used to suddenly dimmed.

Puzzled, Lev turned to the window. “What’s that?”

Although the stars outside glimmered brightly, the moon seemed to have been replaced by a dark sphere emanating white light.

“Is that black shape the moon?”

It was. Slava had entered the moon’s shadow. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Lev saw dull bluish light illuminating the lunar surface. “How come it’s glimmering blue like that?”

“I wonder if it’s reflecting Earth’s oceans,” Irina mused.

“Their light reaches this far? Wow.”

Lev remembered that moonlight shone upon Earth in much the same way. He stared out the window at the lunar surface. The moon didn’t have an atmosphere, so its landscape was clear from a distance. The same scenery Lev had burned into his mind met his eyes: giant craters, rough valleys, dark plains.

It was an ominous sight. Without its usual blanket of light, the lunar surface struck Lev as foreboding. Hard reality had suddenly replaced its surreal beauty. Lev felt as if he’d been tricked by some lunar magic; suddenly, he doubted his long-held dream. Perhaps the people who said the moon was just a rock had been right all along.

At the same time, Lev was in awe. They were truly approaching the place he’d dreamed about since he was a child, and he couldn’t articulate all his feelings.

Irina and Nathan looked silently out the window too. As they stared at the daunting landscape, the words “Nosferatu Syndrome” drifted into Lev’s mind. A wave of uncertainty hit Lev’s bloodstream, engulfing his heart.

“Are you feeling all right, Irina?” he heard himself ask.

Surprised by his question, she turned to him. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“Like, physically.”

“You mean space sickness? Yes, I’m fine. I’m just a bit overwhelmed by the moon.”

Her eyes were clear and beautifully scarlet, as always. Relief and calm settled over Lev, easing the tension in his body. He cursed himself for letting the *Arnack News* reporter’s baseless theories get to him. Yet there *were* people who mistrusted Irina, suspecting she was a monster. Lev made up his mind to capture footage of her healthy, mentally sound demeanor when they shot their broadcast in lunar orbit.

“It’s more barren than I imagined,” Lev muttered. “I’m guessing you two feel that as well.”

Nathan’s brow creased. “Gives me goosebumps to think we’ll land there.”

“It sends a chill down my spine. At this distance, you can’t even pretend it’s beautiful.” Irina shrugged.

“We’ll enter lunar orbit soon,” Lev said. “Let’s get ready and stay focused.”

The moon was so close now, it occupied nearly all the spacecraft’s windows. Its terrain was as monotonous as any desert on Earth. The craters and rocky landscape stretched on and on.

Ensconced in its SLA, *Laelaps* was already in lunar orbit, quietly waiting to be released.

“*Go ahead with lunar orbit insertion,*” CAPCOM said.

“Stop spacecraft rotation,” Lev told Irina.

“Roger.” She shut off the “barbecue mode” that kept the sun from scorching them, then corrected Slava’s position, confirmed their location via sextant, and cross-checked it against the computer’s calculations to ready the vessel for LOI.

To enter lunar orbit, the crew would need to execute two precise deceleration maneuvers. They were tricky, but previous missions had pulled them off, so there was little to worry about. As long as they followed procedure, everything would go without a hitch.

CAPCOM warned them that communications would drop in one minute, sending them off with a message of support. *“All systems look good. See you on the other side of the moon.”*

“Roger,” said Lev. “We’ll have a great time while we’re away.”

Slava flew behind the moon from the left, exactly on schedule, and communications went down. They’d be blocked for forty-eight minutes, but everything the crew said during that window would be recorded.

“Ready reverse engine thrust,” Lev directed.

They first had to slow Slava to 4,800 kilometers per hour to enter the moon’s gravitational pull. The three went through their checklist, feeding commands into DSKY as needed while the HGC displayed their thrust time and direction.

“Thirty-five seconds until ignition,” Nathan said.

DSKY’s display went blank for five seconds. Then Irina moved ahead and engaged the next program. “Entering verb ninety-nine.” When engine thrust began, she tracked its duration with a stopwatch. At the six-minute mark, DSKY showed they’d entered lunar orbit, and Irina beamed.

“Wow! Apoapsis and periapsis data are well within the target range. Our hard work paid off!”

Turning toward DSKY, Nathan put his palms together as if praying. “When we get home, I owe our computing staff an apology. We were fools to treat them like a nuisance.”

Space development had advanced thanks to the hard work of people like Bart and Kaye. There was simply no denying that. They were out of comms range, but Lev mentally thanked them all the same.

“Look at the far side of the moon,” Irina urged.

Lev peered out the window. Unlit by the sun, the moon was a giant black circle cut from a blanket of stars. The far side's terrain was even more ominous than what they saw earlier—steep hills, harsh stone mountain ranges, huge craters, no flat ground whatsoever. It certainly looked like it had faced its share of meteorite showers.

When Lev and Nathan descended to the lunar surface, Irina would be left flying over this area alone. She wouldn't be able to contact mission control, and the people of Earth would be fully focused on the lunar landing. Imagining her total solitude had loneliness seeping into his very bones. He glanced at Irina, wondering how she felt about it, but she went about her work as calmly as always.

As Slava neared comms range, blue light flooded the horizon. It was the earthrise, and it took Lev's breath away. Earth's vivid mix of colors in an otherwise subdued world brought awed sighs to Irina and Nathan's lips.

“*This's New Marseille,*” came CAPCOM's voice as Slava entered range of communications again. “*Do you copy?*”

“Loud and clear,” replied Lev. “Sorry. Earthrise left us momentarily speechless.”

The craft began its second lunar orbit. Before rendezvousing with Laelaps, the crew would briefly survey their planned landing zone in Mare Tranquillitatis. Referring to a lunar map, as well as the topography he'd memorized, Lev scanned the moon's surface. It was dawn in Mare Tranquillitatis, and still dark, so the landing zone wasn't easy to spot. To make matters worse, the sun's angle meant that the mountains and craters cast long shadows. It was difficult to identify the area's landmarks, but Lev kept looking until Earth's pale blue light revealed what he sought.

“There it is!”

He squinted for a better look. The sight wasn't what he expected. Sharp shadows indicated a rocky stretch not nearly as calm as the name “Mare Tranquillitatis” suggested. The area might be silent, but that silence would be reminiscent of the ruins produced in great war.

“That's really it?” Lev muttered in disbelief, checking the map again. “It's definitely Mare Tranquillitatis, but...”

Irina looked up from checking data. “What is it?”

“The photos make it look like an easy place to land. All I see is craters and rocky outcrops, though.”

Nathan looked out the window and winced. “The darkness makes it hard to get a good look, but it doesn’t look very flat to me.”

“Let me see.” Irina floated to the window and stared at Mare Tranquillitatis. “Hold on. Is landing there even possible? The ground’s not at all flat.” Her voice was tinged with worry.

Lev steadied himself. “I have a hunch it looks worse than it is because of the shadows. It *must* be flatter.” He tried to sound hopeful. “Well, let’s get ready to decelerate again!”

The strength of the command was meant to uproot the fear in his heart. Tomorrow morning, Mare Tranquillitatis would be brightly lit, and they’d know for certain.

An hour and thirteen minutes after its first slowdown, Slava decelerated for a second time, completing LOI.

“Wow,” Lev said. “We’re right in line with the target range again.”

He was astounded once more by the HGC’s accuracy, but he wouldn’t be able to rely on the computer’s marvelous calculative abilities during the mission’s final stage. He felt his duties slowly weigh more heavily on him as lunar descent neared.

“Proceed with rendezvous.”

Once CAPCOM issued the command, Irina responded quickly. “Roger. Beginning rendezvous.”

Slava closed in on the SLA shielding Laelaps, then held position thirty kilometers away.

“Looking good,” Lev said, peering out the window from the captain’s chair.

“This is the easy part,” Irina replied.

She really did make it look easy, but that was logical—rendezvous and docking were where she’d sunk the most training time. She needed to be able to handle those tasks completely solo, or Lev and Nathan

would end up floating in the depths of space when they attempted to return.

“Prepare for docking.”

Lev, Irina, and Nathan put on their space suits as a precaution. This docking procedure would be the same as Mission 4’s. Using the moon as a backdrop for visibility, they’d connect with the SLA and pull Laelaps clear.

When their preparations were complete, Lev gave Irina the go-ahead. “No need to rush,” he told her.

“Leave it to me.” Irina read the commands she fed into DSKY aloud. “Starting rendezvous radar. Entering verb forty-four. Complete. Verb forty-eight. Verb twenty-one...?”

“Verb twenty-one confirmed,” Lev echoed.

“Entering verb twenty-one.”

Using the reaction control system, Irina steered Slava within thirty-five meters of the SLA. “Here we go.” She aimed Slava’s nose at the SLA’s closed cover, then slowly approached. “Come on, open up.”

Acquiescing to Irina’s request, the SLA’s four-panel lid opened, revealing Laelaps inside with its legs folded.

“Great! You’re safe! We’re coming to get you!” Irina hurriedly fed a new command into DSKY and began operating the docking probe. The crew closed in on Laelaps, preparing to dock.

“Retrieving Laelaps,” Irina said. “Lev, Nathan, you need to direct me.”

“Roger.”

As they made their first attempt at docking with Laelaps, Lev observed through the monocular. Its field of vision was limited, so it wasn’t an easy task.

“This is so hard. Where am I aiming?” Irina demanded.

“We’re a little too far to the right, Irina,” said Nathan, who had a better view than she did.

Irina carefully steered Slava according to her crewmates’ advice. “How about here? Lev, can you see the SLA?”

“Affirmative, I’ve got its edge. How about you, Nathan?”

“Looks good, Irina. Keep at it.”

It was nerve-racking work, but the crew helped one another make minute adjustments over the course of several minutes.

Irina piloted with laser focus. “I promise we’ll get you out of there, Lelaps.”

Finally, Lev saw Slava’s probe line up with Lelaps’s docking port. “Right there, Irina!”

“Got it!” Irina aligned the probe perfectly, then inched forward. “How are we looking?” she asked eagerly. The probe slid into Lelaps. “We’re good, right?!”

They heard the docking latch make a heavy click, and a loud buzz went through the ship, signaling that they’d successfully connected.

“We did it!” Irina cried, overjoyed.

“Not yet,” Lev said. He kept his cool. “We only made contact.”

“Fine,” Irina replied briskly. She began pulling Lelaps from the SLA. “Be a good boy. Come out nice and easy, puppy.”

Irina retracted the docking probe toward Slava, pulling Lelaps clear of the SLA and firmly into contact with their vessel. Docking was a success.

Irina patted her chest, heaving a sigh of relief. “Now we did it, right?”

“You did great, Irina. Well done.”

“Relying on *your* skills, Lev and I can drift through space without a care in the world,” Nathan joked.

“Not so fast,” Irina retorted. “I’ll charge extra rescue and recovery fees, understand?”

Their playful tones were full of pride for a job well done.

“*Amazing work, Irina,*” CAPCOM said. “*You earned a round of applause from everyone at mission control.*”

“Th-thanks,” she stammered, suddenly bashful. “But I didn’t do it alone.”

“*Let’s go ahead and inspect Lelaps.*” If the lunar module was somehow damaged, the crew would have to return to Earth.

“Roger that!” Lev confirmed. “Exterior looks good.”

Laelaps's sturdy SLA had protected it from exterior damage while traveling, so the crew could move on to inspecting the module's interior while they shot another live broadcast. Then they'd prepare for the lunar descent and landing. They struggled once more from space suits into jumpsuits. It was a workout, as the first time had been.

When Lev and Nathan were ready, Irina opened the hatch in Slava's tip. "See you when you get back."

Past the hatch was a docking tunnel about a meter wide. Lev passed through it, holding the camera; Nathan followed him. At the end of the tunnel, they opened the hatch atop Laelaps, entering headfirst before flipping to plant his feet on the floor.

"Whoa," Lev said, his vision wavering. Confusion racked his brain as up and down suddenly reversed. "I could really do without the space sickness."

Nathan likewise suffered a headache; fortunately, their nausea and confusion lasted only an instant. Lev glanced quickly around Laelaps's interior. Everything was a lifeless gray, the tubing and pipes bare. At the front were the main console, an array of switches and gauges, and both crew members' controls. It all looked very much like the simulator. The only differences were that they were floating and that the moon outside the triangular windows was the real deal.

"No interior damage," Lev stated.

He set about inspecting the systems and interior machinery. Following a checklist, he and Nathan switched on the power, tested the comms, and checked each switch setting. They also positioned their tools and equipment for exploring the lunar surface. During short breaks between those tasks, they filmed the module interior for broadcast. Arnack had developed and produced Laelaps, so there were no restrictions on what they could shoot.

"Finally done," Nathan muttered, wiping sweat from his brow.

Inspecting Laelaps and preparing for the next day's descent had taken four hours. The module was functioning without issues and had been cleared for descent, so there was nothing to worry about now. Utterly exhausted, Lev and Nathan floated up through the tunnel leading to Slava.

"Welcome back." Irina held drinks out to the two of them.

Lev quickly pointed the camera at her. “While Nathan and I were in Laelaps, Irina was hard at work running things in Slava!”

“Wh-what the—?! Nobody said anything to me about filming!” Irina blurted.

“I got permission earlier. Pilot Irina, how’d traveling on your own feel?”

“Huh? Wait a second! I’m not ready.” Irina assumed a serious expression and looked into the camera. “My little trip alone was wonderfully relaxing. Slava is spacious and quiet. And look—the moon’s right outside the window.”

Lev turned the camera toward it. “Slava, our manned spacecraft, is continuing its smooth flight in lunar orbit,” he explained to the audience. “Assuming everything goes according to schedule, Laelaps will disconnect from the CSM and attempt a lunar landing tomorrow morning.”

He, Irina, and Nathan jumped into groundwork for the next day. Their first priority was reexamining Mare Tranquillitatis now that the sun’s position had improved visibility. Lev peered through Slava’s scope, tracing their flight path via lunar landmarks like craters and mountains. Finally, he identified their planned landing zone.

“Huh...?” he said hesitantly, voice quivering.

Though they were still too far away to make out the lunar surface’s details, Lev was shocked. Mare Tranquillitatis was flatter than other areas, but it was full of rocks. The landing zone might be even craggier than it looked from Slava. Lev would be piloting Laelaps for the first time—would it even be possible to land within their planned landing zone’s rugged landscape?

Lev suddenly felt heavy, although he knew he was floating in zero gravity. A curtain of fear fell across his vision.

“What’s wrong?” asked Nathan.

“Take a look.” Lev passed him the scope.

Nathan gazed at the planned landing zone, then let out a heavy sigh, putting a hand to his forehead. “Tranquillitatis, huh? That place doesn’t look tranquil at all.”

Irina, who’d been working on something else, floated to Lev’s side. “Not an easy landing zone?”

“About a hundred times harder than I imagined.” Lev’s honest impression was that the moon itself was repelling humanity. Its giant craters were like eyes watching them. Its rugged valleys cackled, *“Stay on your own planet and know your place, humans.”*

However impossible the lunar landing appeared, he wasn’t about to cave and run home after coming so far. The people of Earth had spent ages building the road to the moon, sometimes suffering casualties in the process, and they were closer than ever before. Lev, Irina, and Nathan were intent on completing their mission.

“It might be unwelcoming, but we *will* land on it.” Lev glared at the planned landing zone, but his words seemed aimed within.

Descent neared, but one more television broadcast was still scheduled—the last before their landing attempt. It was Lev’s duty as captain to explain how descent would unfold.

Stuffing down the pressure building inside him, he told the camera about the craters and mountains that would define their descent to the surface. At the same time, he ran simulations in his head. He kept going back to the rocky landing zone. Their only option now was to descend in Laelaps, recheck the area, and—if they deemed the planned landing impossible—find another spot to land with what fuel they had left.

Where else could they go?

All Lev could do was hope and pray there was a flat patch near the landing zone. If they wound up needing to find another area, fuel would be paramount, and they’d have to manage it as efficiently as possible. They’d already be carrying limited fuel to minimize the lunar module’s weight.

The time to the lunar descent ticked down. Lev pored over the lunar map and descent procedure; he didn’t even put down the documents to eat. Squeezing his liquid meal into his mouth, he envisioned a perfect descent and landing. Nathan reviewed all the details too, knowing how dangerous the descent phase was going to be.

Lev couldn’t free himself from worry. He’d trained to his very limits—to the point that he was prepared for anything—but all that work crumbled away when he looked at the lunar surface. Previously unthinkable doubts whirled around in his head. Would the module break during descent? Would Laelaps work properly? What if its legs

buckled upon landing? Nausea struck him. He felt like he couldn't breathe.

A cold blob of water splashed his face.

"Ack!" Lev's head snapped up, only for him to see Irina aiming the water pistol right at him. "What're you doing?!"

"If you get all worked up, you'll never be able to execute the descent. I'll handle the CSM chores today. You and Nathan hurry up and get ready for bed." Her tone was sharp, but her eyes swam with worry. "Come on! I said, get to bed! I have a water pistol and I'm *not* afraid to use it!" She gestured toward their sleeping bags with the toy gun.

Nathan folded his lunar map. "She's right. If we don't rest up, we won't be able to focus on anything."

"I know." Lev folded his own map to get ready for bed.

Only then did Irina lower her water pistol, a satisfied expression floating to her face. "There we go. Neither of you worry about a thing. You've prepared more than enough. The descent *will* succeed. I personally guarantee that on behalf of the people of the moon."

She giggled. She had no proof they'd succeed, but all the same, she'd imbued Lev with confidence and pulled him from the depths of despair. He doubted he'd get any sleep, but he settled into his sleeping bag and tried to rest.

The face of the moon changed in sunlight. Dawn brought long shadows that lightened as morning arrived, turning the gray lunar surface golden brown.

"*Good morning, everyone.*" Aaron Fifield was back in the CAPCOM chair. "*Today's the big day.*"

It was six in the morning in Arnack. Lev hadn't slept well; he'd spent most of the night dozing in a dream state. He had watched the lunar landing fail, and the lunar surface turn into a face and swallow them—but those were only dreams.

Trying to raise his spirits a little, Lev responded to CAPCOM with bright cheer. "Good morning, New Marseille! The three of us are good

to go!"

"Glad to hear it. December 25th's a holiday here in the United Kingdom. Queen Sundancia, members of parliament, and a number of Arnackian citizens will be praying at church. They'll pray to the Lord for your success as well."

In quiet Slava, far from the bustle of life on Earth, the three crew members worked together to don their space suits. Lev and Nathan needed to wear theirs to explore the lunar surface, and Irina had to be ready in case of trouble when Laelaps left on its descent. Lev made sure her ivy keepsake was in his shoulder pocket, then pressed a hand to it, hoping for good luck.

When Nathan had pulled on everything but his helmet and gloves, he tapped Lev on the shoulder. "I'll head into Laelaps and start getting ready." Turning to Irina, he saluted. "See you when we get back."

Irina saluted in return. "Roger that. Enjoy your honeymoon with Lev."

Laughing, Nathan headed into the docking tunnel.

Irina helped Lev finish tugging on his suit. "Know what I'm thinking about right now?" she whispered.

"Release preparations?"

"No. I was wondering..." Irina looked bashful, then went on, "I was wondering whether, if you work in space someday, this is how I'll see you off."

Embarrassed warmth flashed through Lev's body. "Let's just hope space suits are easier to put on when that day comes."

"Mm-hmm. You'll be late for work every day if we have to go to this much trouble."

All that remained was Lev's helmet and gloves. Irina floated up and put her hands on his shoulders, then leaned in and planted a kiss on his cheek. "I'll be waiting for you in orbit."

"I promise we'll return." Before Lev left, he gave her a salute, calling her by a name that was nostalgic for the pair—a call sign only a select few had known. "See you soon, Lycoris."

"Be careful, Aster."

He kicked off the floor into the docking tunnel. Irina closed the

hatch behind him from inside Slava, while Lev closed Laelaps's hatch. The next time he opened it, he'd hold a moon rock.

Lev offered Slava a final salute. "See you soon too, Chief."

Nathan was running final checks in Laelaps when Lev arrived. He stood at the console on the right; Lev stood at the left console. Between them was DSKY. Dull light pulsed from the lunar module's gauges, and one particular button caught Lev's eye: the "abort" button they wanted to avoid pressing at all costs.

Lev slid his boots into fastenings on the floor and pulled a belt over his space suit to secure himself. They weren't ready to disengage yet—Slava would help them ready Laelaps in orbit. Short transmissions flew back and forth as they prepared to release the module.

"Irina, enter noun twenty."

"Roger that, Lev. Verb six. Noun twenty."

They turned on the rendezvous radar in case the mission was canceled—a precaution Lev hoped would prove unnecessary. Once the lunar module was finally prepped, CAPCOM addressed them on mission control's behalf. "*This's New Marseille. Laelaps, you're clear to release.*"

"Roger. Let's do it, Irina."

A hundred hours had passed since Slava launched on December 21, and Laelaps was finally ready to descend from the far side of the moon.

"*One minute to release,*" said Irina. "*How are the settings?*"

"Good to go," replied Lev.

"Roger. *Thirty seconds.*"

Lev timed it on his stopwatch, and the reaction control engine blasted exactly on time. A loud metallic sound rang through the module. Since Laelaps was designed to be as light as possible, it had no soundproofing—the noise of the engine hit them directly.

"I feel it in my lungs," Nathan muttered.

Laelaps flew twenty meters from Slava.

"*You did it!*" Irina cried.

Lev initiated Laelaps's slow rotation. "Irina, module check, please." The CSM and lunar module would briefly remain in

rendezvous.

“All right.” Irina observed the module carefully. *“Laelaps’s legs and body are fine. No landing gear problems.”*

“Thanks. Separation complete.”

“It’s like a puppy begging me to rub its stomach.” Irina giggled, ending transmission.

The lunar module was upside down; the windows above Lev and Nathan showed the lunar surface, not space or the stars. Irina monitored Laelaps and updated mission control, ready to begin rescue operations at any sign of trouble. The vessels were within sight of each other, but Slava would stay in lunar orbit, so Laelaps would disappear from Irina’s sight once descent began.

Both spacecraft passed the far side of the moon, and communications with mission control resumed. *“All systems are good, Laelaps. Proceed with descent.”*

Lev and CAPCOM exchanged a few messages, sharing data, and Laelaps readied its thrusters. The next phase required them to enter “descent orbit” at 15,000 meters, the orbital radius closest to the lunar surface. Mission 4’s crew had done this, so Lev and Nathan simply followed in their footsteps. Simultaneously, Lev would need to confirm their flight path and measure the time to the next phase against their planned arrival. If they deviated, they’d waste fuel getting back on track. Lev used landing point designator markings engraved on the window, as well as lunar landmarks, to quickly calculate and confirm their flight status.

“New Marseille, we’re reapproaching the far side of the moon. After comms drop, we’ll sink to descent orbit.”

“Roger. See you on the other side.”

The scheduled deceleration to put the lunar module into descent orbit approached. DSKY’s display blinked when it arrived, telling them the thrusters were ready.

“Nathan, go ahead.”

“Roger. Starting thrust.” Nathan used DSKY to fire the thrusters, slowing them over a period of almost thirty seconds.

“Perfect.”

The display blinked, signaling that they'd entered descent orbit. The HGC was working perfectly.

“This is Slava,” Irina said from lunar orbit. *“How’d it go?”*

“Slowdown complete on schedule,” Lev replied proudly. “No wasted time. Perfect, huh?”

“I saw you drifting away,” Irina said, sounding happy. *“At this rate, you’ll be fine without me.”*

“You just watch. We’ll handle things.”

“Nathan, take care of Lev, would you?”

“What about you?” Nathan asked. “Will you be all right alone?”

“Are you kidding? It’s so roomy here now. I love it. You two go off and have fun walking your puppy. If anything happens, I’m here ready to save you—but I’ll be praying I don’t need to. Bring me back a souvenir, Lev. Over and out.” With that, she ended transmission.

Lev was relieved to hear Irina’s usual irreverence, but at the same time, it stung his heart. She always put on the strongest front to hide pain and loneliness. Although she’d told them she was fine alone, Lev knew how badly it pained her to be stuck in lunar orbit so near the moon. He closed his eyes, which burned with tears as he pictured Irina staring out Slava’s window.

There was no other way. This was their duty. The lunar landing was a binational initiative, not a project they’d funded themselves.

“We’re doing this for Irina too,” he told Nathan.

“Of course.”

Lev took a deep breath, settling his nerves. Mission 4 had paved the path to this point; everything from here on was the true “final mission.” The lunar descent was expected to take about two and a half hours, and it would consist of three guided phases, not one fell swoop.

During phase one, the HGC’s autopilot would lower their altitude from 15,000 to 2,200 meters. In phase two, he and Nathan would monitor the lunar module as they descended from 2,200 to 120 meters. Lev would control and land the module in phase three. Throughout those three phases, Lev and Nathan would use verbs sixty-three to sixty-eight to run descent programs. Verb sixty-three would alter the lunar module’s roll, pitch, and yaw to adjust its position. Verb sixty-eight

would confirm their landing.

Lev touched the control stick to his right, his heart swelling with emotion. The left control stick would adjust their descent speed. It was with these tools that he and Nathan would guide Laelaps to its fated destination.

The lunar module stayed in descent orbit for two hours, searching for the best location to start phase one. Once that began, there'd be no relaxing and no more inspections. The flight would be a battle against fuel and time.

Nathan watched the data readouts. "Ready to go ahead with verb sixty-three?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. We're on standby until we hit the scheduled descent zone."

"Roger. Let's proceed to the inspection."

They input verb sixty-three, and the HGC automatically decelerated the craft, bringing Laelaps closer to the lunar surface. The autopilot system worked by comparing current flight data to recorded data in the computer. Lev couldn't simply press a button to whisk the module to the lunar surface—he and Nathan had to initiate functions, revise data, and check the countless switches filling the module interior. Only teamwork would lead Laelaps safely to the moon.

Nathan started the camera to record their descent. "This will drag on for an eternity, but don't let Laelaps bite you."

"I'll take it down nice and easy," Lev assured him. "All right. Start the landing radar."

"Roger. Switching it on."

"Get ready for phase one."

Two hours had passed since they dropped into descent orbit, and they were nearing the descent point. Nathan monitored his console data carefully as Lev reviewed his map and the lunar landmarks, approximating Laelaps's position.

"Flight status is fine," he told CAPCOM. "No issues." The engine and related systems were functioning normally; all they had to worry about was their descent. Still, Lev's palms were clammy.

"This's New Marseille. Understood. Proceed with phase one descent."

That was the transmission they'd been waiting for. Nathan quickly followed up. "Nearing the descent point."

In the next fifteen minutes, Lev and Nathan would attempt to descend to the lunar surface. The entirety of space development was at stake. If they ran out of fuel or crashed, their mission was over.

Lev wouldn't fail. He'd accomplish his mission and keep his promise to Irina. "Come on, let's do this!" he shouted. "Ignition!"

"Ignition," Nathan confirmed. "Thrust at 10 percent."

Descent began slow and easy so the HGC could keep up. The lunar module was so quiet, Lev wondered whether its engine was even running. They maintained that speed for thirty seconds. Then the module suddenly shuddered as it dropped faster, jolting Lev's entire body. He updated New Marseille. "Descending toward lunar surface."

"Roger that. Data looks great from here."

DSKY logged the module's altitude and descent speed, and Nathan read them aloud every few seconds to compare against their flight plan. "Descending nine meters per second. We're almost exactly on schedule. Our timetable was amazingly accurate."

They were off to a good start. The gauges and data readouts were normal. Laelaps flew upside down, windows still facing the lunar surface. Lev examined the ground, noticing the landmarks he'd memorized to prevent flight path or schedule errors. He knew the lunar surface so well, he didn't even need to check his map.

So far, so good. Setting his hand on the control stick, Lev spoke to the module from his heart. *Please, Laelaps. No need to struggle. You just have to stay on course.*

Three minutes into descent, their altitude was 14,000 meters. Lev let Nathan update mission control, remaining focused on the moon. "Aiming radar antenna at lunar surface."

The ship shifted slightly. With each moment they inched toward the surface, the shadows thickened and darkened, and the topography grew clearer. Lev fought to stay calm, his heart throbbing as it struck him how different the moon was from Earth.

"Target crater confirmed." Lev looked down at his stopwatch to confirm how much time had elapsed. "Huh?" *We're three seconds ahead.*

His pulse quickened. Thinking he might've miscalculated, he

confirmed their timing against a landmark. The result was the same; they were three seconds early. When had they gotten off schedule?

Lev immediately reported their status to Nathan. “We reached the target three seconds ahead of time.”

“I’ll check the ship data,” Nathan replied, perfectly composed as he examined his display. “Descent speed isn’t an issue. Neither is craft orientation.”

“Understood.”

What had they done wrong? When had they dropped too quickly? Their check moments earlier had been fine, and they were decelerating on schedule. Sweat beaded on Lev’s back. The mission guidelines stated that they’d abort descent if their timing deviated by four or more seconds. That long a discrepancy would lead into potentially dangerous territory rather than the planned landing zone.

“The computer’s showing a deviation of four centimeters per second,” Nathan reported. “What should we do?”

Correcting that deviation would require the thrusters. It would consume precious fuel and might endanger the module. Lev quickly weighed those risks against the deviation; with descent well underway, he had no time to investigate the dilemma exhaustively.

“We’ll maintain our course,” he said. “We’re still on the planned flight path. If we get more than three seconds ahead of schedule, we’ll consider other options.”

“Roger that.”

Lev used their speed and timing to calculate their distance from the lunar surface, then reported, “New Marseille, it looks like we’ll come down five kilometers ahead of the planned landing zone.”

That was within an acceptable range, which Lev could hear in CAPCOM’s calm reply. *“Roger that. Maintain course.”*

A chill skittered down Lev’s spine. They were flying into the unknown, unsure what would happen. Fortunately, they’d noticed they were ahead of schedule while the issue was manageable. Putting a hand to his shoulder pocket to touch his ivy keepsake, Lev said a silent prayer. *Let us continue safely.*

Descent continued, still three seconds ahead. Little by little, the module got ready to land, spinning slowly so the windows facing the

surface pointed upward instead. When they reached 12,000 meters, the landing radar activated. The HGC took in flight data, performed calculations for manual controls, and managed the reaction control engine automatically. The module rocked over and over as Laelaps “barked” with each engine thrust—as though their big puppy was frightened, enraged, or maybe reluctant to descend at all.

“I can’t believe how much it’s rocking.” Another shiver of fear rippled through Lev. He’d expected to descend far more smoothly, and he couldn’t help wondering whether this would make manual control harder. It was already tough, and in the airless vacuum of space, the slightest touch moved the module. “Is the engine’s thrust range normal?”

“Yes,” replied Nathan. “We might be rocking because fuel’s sloshing around.”

“I think you’re right. Looks like the simulator couldn’t account for that.”

The lunar module’s weight had been minimized, so the movement of the remaining fuel had a stronger effect than they’d expected. Lev knew ANSA’s simulators were the best on Earth, but even they couldn’t completely replicate this journey to an unexplored world.

The fuel movement’s effects were bearable, and the module’s slow rotation and descent continued until CAPCOM said, “*Strange. We’re getting sporadic comms interference.*”

“What’s the cause?” asked Lev.

“*Unknown. We’re looking into it.*”

Now Lev and Nathan had a huge new problem to deal with: transmission instability. Any obstruction to sharing information would deplete Lev’s ability to focus. Nevertheless, he was ready for anything. It would’ve been nothing short of a miracle if their first flight to the moon was without issues. Lev knew that when he and Nathan couldn’t make judgments from the module, the best and brightest at mission control would assist them.

Nathan worked backward toward the source of the issue. “The antenna could be unstable. It’s angled automatically—let’s try manually adjusting it.”

At times like these, Nathan’s wealth of experience was on display.

His knowledge and composure under pressure were sources of strength for Lev. With some effort, they kept contact with CAPCOM until they'd reangled the antenna and stabilized communications.

“This puppy of ours isn’t always obedient,” Nathan said with a sigh.

Lev gave the control stick a friendly pat. “Nice job, Laelaps. Be a good boy.”

Laelaps shuddered in response.

They were five minutes into descent and scheduled to land in less than ten. The lunar module slowly spun upright, and its landing radar locked on to their target zone, preparing Lev and Nathan for the final phase. It wasn’t yet smooth sailing—the fuel’s churning worsened, jolting Laelaps every few seconds.

“Nathan, how much fuel’s left?”

“Fifty-two percent.” That was well within the planned amount, so the module continued to descend.

“I see. The rocking’s probably peaked.”

“I think so. It’ll calm as our fuel load lightens.”

“The last thing I want is for us to crash.”

After that exchange, Lev wanted to test something else, and quickly: Laelaps’s manual controls. The sooner he was confident with those, the easier it’d be to assess Mare Tranquillitatis and find a spot to land.

Six minutes into descent, at 10,000 meters, shrill beeping rang through the lunar module—an alarm was sounding off. Lev looked at his DSKY display, where a warning light blinked. Something was wrong with the HGC. “Nathan. Error code.”

“I’m on it.” Nathan tapped some keys, and DSKY displayed the number 1202. “I never saw 1202 in the simulator,” he muttered, frowning.

“Let’s ask about it.” Lev contacted mission control. “New Marseille, we’re seeing error code 1202. Tell us what we’re looking at, please.”

“We’ll check right now. If the module’s functioning normally, proceed with descent.”

“Roger!”

Lev and Nathan hurriedly checked gauges and HGC data. Everything was within normal parameters, but for all they knew, a hidden component was critically damaged. If the alarm sounded nonstop for three minutes, they’d have to decide whether to abort the mission.

Lev glanced at the red “abort” button. He hated how the sound of the alarm gripped him with fear. Taking a deep breath, he told himself things would be fine; this wasn’t a malfunction. He believed in his comrades at mission control and that they’d find an answer. He trusted them.

Twenty seconds later, Lev heard the familiar hiss indicating contact from mission control. Tension was apparent in CAPCOM’s voice. *“That error isn’t dangerous. You can turn off the alarm, and descent can proceed.”*

The transmission was the light at the end of the tunnel. “Roger!” Lev replied. “What was the problem?”

“An overflow warning. The HGC received too much data. But Bart confirmed that the necessary programs are running smoothly.”

“Thank him for me.” Even from afar, Bart was dependable as ever.

Nathan turned the alarm off, and they continued to descend.

“The landing radar’s measurements deviate from the computer calculations,” Nathan noted during a status update. “I’ll input the new radar data.”

“Thanks.” Lev began prepping for manual control while Nathan punched in the data.

Beep! Another alarm rang out—error code 1202.

“Again?!” Lev couldn’t hide his shock.

Nathan’s brow furrowed as he contacted mission control. “Noun sixty-eight, verb sixteen triggered an alarm.”

“Proceed with descent. We’re working on a fix.”

The request Nathan had made called up specific information on DSKY: the time till the next phase, plus their current speed and distance from the landing zone. He and Lev had to wonder whether trying to run it had caused the error.

Mission control spent some time on the issue before CAPCOM got in touch with an update. *“Personnel here will monitor Laelaps to ease the HGC’s load. We’ll read you the data you need.”*

“Thanks,” said Nathan. “We’ll avoid running more commands for now.” He turned the alarm off.

Lev guessed the additional control-center processing would mean a heavier workload for Kaye. That wouldn’t be easy, but they had to rely on her.

A while later, the alarm went off again. *Beep! Beep!*

“Did the last command we ran set it off?!” cried Lev, rattled.

They turned the alarm off once more, but before long, it resumed.

Nathan contacted mission control immediately. “New Marseille, are you sure we’re okay?”

“If that alarm keeps going off in quick succession, we’ll have to consider aborting,” CAPCOM told them on Bart’s behalf. *“Sporadic alarms aren’t an issue, though.”*

“In that case, we aren’t in trouble yet. The alarms are intermittent. We’ll proceed.”

“Roger that, Lev.”

Despite potentially life-threatening circumstances, Nathan didn’t raise objections. He left the flight in Lev’s hands and monitored the computer, not even glancing out the window. He must’ve been concerned, but he trusted Lev to make the right call.

As Laelaps descended to 7,000 meters, the alarm for error code 1202 continued to ring now and then.

“Are you the moon’s guard dog?” Lev muttered at the module. He couldn’t focus on testing the manual controls, so he went on conducting their systems check. “Reaction control system good. Lunar module descent engine good. Pressure levels good.” Speed and altitude were within appropriate ranges as well.

“Seven minutes have passed since starting descent. Yapping guard dog aside, things look good.”

He was correct. There were no issues with the module, which was now at 6,400 meters. The alarms continued, though, and handling them ate up time for the manual control test. Lev’s priority was continuing

the mission, but all he could do for now was ensure the module was safe and stable.

Irina had yet to contact them, but Lev knew she listened to every transmission. She couldn't help with anything from Slava, so she probably didn't see the point of checking in. Still, Lev knew she was worried. *Don't worry, Irina. We'll be okay.*

Nathan kept reading out data. "Altitude is 4,876 meters."

After each alarm, Lev checked Lelaps's systems. The seemingly playful "guard dog" barked and shuddered as it steadily approached the moon. Eight minutes had passed since they started. Looking out the window, Lev saw how close the lunar surface was.

"Prepare for phase two," he directed. They could begin that phase when they hit 2,200 meters.

"Roger. I'll confirm with CAPCOM." Nathan contacted the mission control center. "New Marseille, can we switch to verb sixty-four in the next minute? We're at 2,200 meters." In phase two, that verb could reset the module's landing zone.

"Thirty seconds to switch."

"Thirty seconds," repeated Nathan.

Lev carefully checked the time, then issued his next command. "Verb sixty-four."

"Roger. Entering verb sixty-four."

"Beginning lunar surface approach phase."

Lelaps would now drop quickly from 2,200 meters to just 120. The module continued to turn, windows now facing the direction they were headed in. The HGC was still guiding them toward their planned destination, but since the computer couldn't observe the lunar surface, it was crucial that Lev confirm a safe landing zone. In the simulator, he'd done so directly after queueing verb sixty-four. But now, due to the unexpected alarms, he *still* hadn't tested the manual controls.

Nathan constantly fed Lev data. "Altitude 1,500 meters. Descent speed thirty meters per second. Module condition good."

As he listened, Lev felt his panic rising. They were behind schedule; he had to move faster.

Irina's voice echoed in his mind as though she were right there

with him: “*Don’t rush.*”

You’re right, Lev thought. *I don’t have to. I’ve still got time.* He took a deep breath and informed Nathan and CAPCOM, “I’m going to check the reaction controls manually.”

“*Roger,*” CAPCOM replied.

Switching from autopilot to manual controls, Lev gingerly maneuvered the control stick to get the feel of flying Laelaps. The engine thrust lightly. His left hand hit a switch, keeping their descent speed at thirty meters per second.

“Hmm. Not bad,” he said. Laelaps really did feel similar to the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle. The sloshing fuel made piloting trickier, but the rocking had calmed as they burned fuel. Lev’s hands had the muscle memory needed to pilot the craft. “Manual controls are excellent!” he declared brightly.

“*Great. Keep it up. Continue toward landing.*”

“*Roger!*” The module, now almost upright, dropped to 600 meters. Having finished the manual control test, Lev took a good look at Mare Tranquillitatis, using the landing zone measurements and HGC calculations for landing point designator to search for a spot to land. “Nathan, pull the LPD.”

Beep! Another alarm.

“Just when I thought things calmed down,” Lev muttered.

“Error code is...1201.” Nathan’s voice betrayed his concern.

“A different error?!” For a moment, Lev didn’t believe it. Until now, error code 1202 had been triggering the alarm. Goosebumps rippled across his skin, and fear pricked at his spine.

Nathan immediately contacted CAPCOM. “New Marseille, we’re seeing error code 1201. What’re we looking at?”

“*Checking now. How are Laelaps’s systems?*”

Lev took a quick look. “Guidance system and thrusters are fine.”

“No display issues either,” Nathan added. “Data updating smoothly.”

Once they’d confirmed that the module was functioning, mission control made its decision. “*Ignore the error. Proceed with the mission!*”

“You’re *sure* it’s not a problem?” Nathan asked.

“All the computer’s programs shut down for a second, then began operating based on priority. That stops the computer from freezing due to overflow. It’s what caused the error code you’re looking at.”

“So, the HGC’s guidance system is still accurate?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I know we’ve got the best engineers on the planet working on this. But, please, tell them to make these constant alarms more bearable,” said Nathan. “At least have them be entertaining or something. They’re doing a number on our heart rates.”

“In exchange, you’ll have to give us a no-fuss landing that’ll put us at ease.”

“Give them the greatest show the world’s ever seen, Lev.”

“Got it!”

Lev had prepared himself for anything, but the constant alarms were breaking his concentration. He racked his brain, and there it was: an answer, perhaps one simpler than they’d all thought. Error codes 1201 and 1202 stemmed from overflow, which meant the descent procedures were instructing the crew to use commands that weren’t required. They didn’t need to follow their checklist religiously, though. This was the first-ever attempt at a lunar descent, and the crew had the best idea of the conditions.

“Nathan. Just run programs required for descent and landing. Leave the rest to mission control.”

“Roger. Good call.”

Lev’s decision quickly bore fruit; Laelaps dropped to five hundred meters without a single alarm.

“Proceeding to landing zone selection.” Lev peered out the window at the moon’s rocky horizon. Gazing downward, he spotted a small flat patch in a crater—Mare Tranquillitatis—and squinted for a better look. “What’s the LPD?”

Nathan read out the angle displayed on DSKY. “Forty-seven degrees.”

Lev checked that point using the window’s landing zone measurements. The HGC was guiding them to a spot that lacked steep

mountains or valleys, which was a good sign. Still, Lev couldn't see the area clearly.

The LDP angle changed as Laelaps descended, but Nathan rattled off constant updates. "LPD thirty-five degrees. Altitude 228 meters. Descent speed seven meters per second." Just below Lev, the potential landing point drew nearer. "LPD thirty-three degrees. Altitude 213 meters. Descent speed six meters per second."

Lev focused, watching the surface closely. "Huh? Wait!" Sudden panic filled his voice.

Laelaps was flying over an apparently flat location, heading toward an area full of giant craters. Was that because they'd been three seconds ahead of schedule earlier? Or had a gravitational abnormality thrown off their flight path? Lev wasn't sure.

The module continued flying over the surface, guided by unseen power. Lev knew they wouldn't be able to land among the craters—Laelaps's legs would break. But he didn't tell Nathan, Irina, or mission control that. There was no point. Their fates rested on his shoulders, since he held Laelaps's leash. He needed to lead the module to a safe flat patch. The only way forward was through. As he prepared to land, he was certain he'd succeed.

Ten minutes had passed since descent began, and the module now carried roughly five minutes' worth of fuel.

"Altitude 150 meters. Descent speed five meters per second," said Nathan.

"You've passed the low gate. You can enter the landing phase."

From here, it was up to Lev to steer manually. "Verb sixty-six."

"Roger. Entering verb sixty-six."

"Beginning manual altitude adjustment." The HGC would handle descent automatically, but Lev could fly to a new landing zone by controlling the module's direction and speed. "Entering final phase. Prepare for landing."

With that, Lev gripped the two control sticks, his eyes on the crater ahead. The right stick could pitch the module two degrees forward or back, or rotate it half a degree left or right. The left stick's toggle could roll the module side to side, or accelerate or decelerate for thirty seconds.

It was the moment of truth. Lev used the left stick to balance Laelaps and slow its descent while he again sought a flat area to land. Should he fly right or left of the crater? Fly *past* it or land nearby?

Given Laelaps's fuel level, there was barely time to hesitate. Lev glanced in both directions. Rocks on the right, on the left, everywhere. It wouldn't be safe to land in the immediate area. He could fly over the crater, but he wasn't sure what terrain awaited on the other side. It might be worse.

He shook that thought from his mind. It didn't matter. He had dreamed of space and the stars above; he'd chased them since the moment he became a cosmonaut. He had overcome everything that threatened to stop him from reaching his dreams. He would overcome this too.

Lev approached the sky above the crater, braced himself, and flew over. Laelaps tilted backward, but Lev advanced while cautiously slowing their descent.

"Altitude a hundred and twenty meters. Descent speed twenty-seven centimeters per second. Forward thrust 1.5 meters per second." Nathan didn't look outside while he read Lev the data, but there was a change in him. His instincts as a pilot sensed danger.

"No issues. Everything's going smoothly." To reassure his crewmate, Lev kept calm, channeling Irina's steeliness. He wanted to be strong of mind and will, whatever the circumstances.

After about nine seconds, Lev had flown them past the crater. A craggy rock appeared before them; he dodged it, tilting the module left.

"Altitude 107 meters. Descent speed 1.2 meters per second. Maintaining forward thrust."

Their descent had accelerated, Lev realized. He slowed, again looking for someplace to land. Just as before, no safe location presented itself.

The sunlight intensified, and the lunar surface resembled a white sheet of paper. Since it had no atmosphere, the moon received sunlight in full force. It dazzled Lev. He hadn't expected that but should've known it was possible—he'd looked up at the shining face of the moon on countless nights.

Regretting his lack of foresight wouldn't do anything for him now.

Lev squinted. All he could do was wait until he saw the surface more clearly.

“Altitude ninety meters. Descent speed one meter per second. Forward thrust fourteen meters per second!” Nathan suddenly raised his voice. “Lev! You’re going too fast!”

He’d been fixated on the surface. “I’ll slow us down,” he said calmly, changing the module’s speed. He looked out at the moon again. As his eyes adjusted, the environment grew clearer. Wherever he looked, the surface was too rocky. Suddenly, it wasn’t just the landing zone he was worried about. “Nathan, fuel status?”

“Eight percent remaining.”

Lev had landed the module at this fuel level in the simulator, but it was dangerous. Soon Nathan would realize their predicament. Lev looked everywhere for a spot to land, from mountainsides to valley slopes. Finally, he saw a flat patch between two craters. The location was within reach.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “I found a landing zone!”

“Roger that,” Nathan replied. “Altitude seventy-six meters. Descent speed seventy centimeters per second.”

Perhaps it was Lev’s imagination, but for a moment, Nathan sounded relieved. Reangling the module, he headed for their target.

“Altitude fifty meters. Hm?” Nathan paused. “The radar lost sight of the surface,” he said, voice taut.

“Roger.” That wasn’t an issue, since the radar would recover soon. Lev continued toward their descent point.

“Fuel light flashing! We’re at five percent!”

Mission control began a ninety-four second countdown. Once it hit zero, Lev would have to make a choice: land within twenty seconds or abort the mission.

Their target was in sight. They still had time. As they got closer, however, Lev realized the area was strewn with rocks he hadn’t seen from a distance.

“No way...” The shock was like a blow to the jaw. A moment of hesitation gripped him. *Is landing there still possible?* He shook his head. He refused to be so reckless. He’d search until their fuel level was

critical. “I’m going to look farther ahead.”

“Got it. I trust you. Altitude thirty-five meters. Good news—the radar’s back.”

Laelaps was reaching its limit. They’d overshot their landing zone, and Lev no longer knew their location within Mare Tranquillitatis. As he wondered where and how he’d erred, a seed of regret sprouted within him, but he nipped it in the bud. He’d save his regrets till he knew for certain he’d failed.

CAPCOM’s voice was tense. *“Sixty seconds remaining.”*

Lev kept going. They had a whole minute to work with. He wasn’t ready to give up yet.

“Altitude thirty meters,” said Nathan.

They flew past several large craters, approaching the corner of a particularly steep one. Its terrain was harsh, but Lev’s hopes weren’t dashed yet. Laelaps didn’t need a runway; the craft was only ten meters wide, and touching down would be no different from landing a helicopter on a roof. They just needed a clearing.

Lev’s utter concentration was evident in his eyes as he scoured the lunar surface.

“Wait! There!”

He’d spotted it: a flat space sandwiched between a crater’s edge and a huge boulder. At their thirty-meter altitude, Lev saw clearly that the area was safe. “I’ve got our landing zone!” He took hold of Laelaps’s controls, nearing their new target.

“Altitude twenty-seven meters.”

“Prepare for landing!”

Lev brought Laelaps down, using the manual controls to right the craft. As they neared the surface, he gently slowed the module with the thrusters.

An ashy gray substance coated the windows. The mist was unlike anything Lev had ever seen; it eliminated all visibility.

“What the—?!” *Is that moondust?*

Laelaps’s thrusters had seemingly stirred a sandstorm. Even in the toughest simulations, they’d never encountered this.

“Forty-five seconds remaining.”

Lev clenched his fists, gritting his teeth. Why was the lunar surface intent on repelling humans at every possible turn? It was as though the moon itself worried that humanity would just steal its resources—and one day destroy it.

Perhaps that would come to pass in the future. But Lev was intent on landing now. If the moon rejected humankind’s greed and ambition, it had to recognize that its very existence had stoked them.

Furthermore, mythology was on Project Soyuz’s side: Lelaps never let prey escape. This landing was the module’s destiny.

“Visibility’s poor,” Lev told CAPCOM. “We’ll have to give up on observation and use data to land.”

He turned from the window to the data readings inside the module. The landing zone was clear, so this procedure would be straightforward—decrease Lelaps’s horizontal velocity to zero and bring the craft down parallel.

Lev lowered the module into the deep gray mist, hands clutching the controls and eyes absorbing data. He had to keep Lelaps steady. If it rocked and landed at an angle, its legs would break.

“Thirty seconds remaining.”

“Altitude eighteen meters. Descent speed seventy-five centimeters per second. Forward thrust sixty centimeters per second.”

Lev heard it all as he absorbed the display’s data readings. It would take longer than he’d expected to come to a horizontal halt. Still, they weren’t out of time. He balanced the module slowly.

“Lev,” said Nathan. “Lelaps is drifting left and backward.”

A shiver went down Lev’s spine. “What?! I didn’t do that.”

“Left drift speed sixty centimeters per second.”

“I’ll fix it.” Lev wasn’t sure what had triggered the unexpected drift. He fought to calm their hunting dog as it locked on to its prey, stabilizing the module every few seconds with the toggle switch. *Easy now.*

“Twenty seconds remaining.”

Neither member of the lunar module crew had time to respond to CAPCOM.

“We’re thirteen meters from the surface,” Nathan told Lev with a touch of panic. “Descent speed sixty centimeters per second. Backward drift has ceased.”

All that remained was to stop drifting left, then keep the module stabilized. Did they have enough time? If they rushed the landing and one of Laelaps’s legs broke, the moon would become their gravesite.

As Lev checked another gauge, the red “abort” button leaped out at him. If he pressed that, Laelaps would return to Slava. Even if that left him and Nathan floating in space, Irina would rescue them.

Lev wasn’t going to let that happen. Irina would only laugh at him. *“That’s what I’d expect of a human,”* she’d say.

He’d made her a promise to land on the moon, bring her a moon rock, and spend the rest of his life with her. Failure simply wasn’t an option. Lev refused to die here. He jettisoned his remaining doubts and worries into the depths of space. *We’ll succeed and return home. I know it.*

“Five meters from the surface,” said Nathan.

“*Fifteen seconds remaining.*”

Lev gently reined Laelaps in, working with the module rather than steering forcefully. Surrounded by moondust, he closed his eyes to feel the spacecraft’s minute movements. He sensed the module drifting over the surface as he lightly adjusted the controls.

At long last, they came to a stop.

“Horizontal velocity is zero!” said Nathan. “Front velocity’s zero too. Great!”

Finally cooperative, Laelaps descended slowly and easily. Since the windows were obscured, Lev didn’t know exactly where the surface was, but they were approaching it.

“*Eight seconds remaining!*”

“Lev! Aren’t we there?!”

“*Four seconds!*”

The countdown was ending.

“*Two! One! Zero! Zero...!*” It was the first strong emotion they’d heard in CAPCOM’s usually calm voice. *“Land or abort! You have twenty seconds to decide!”*

Aborting was out of the question. Lev didn't hesitate. "We're landing."

In just a few moments, the sensor probes on Laelaps's legs would touch the surface, and the interior contact light would glow blue to show that they were grounded. All Lev had to do now was wait.

"*Can you do it?!*" demanded CAPCOM.

Lev and Nathan waited for the contact light. The module was on the very brink of its fuel limits.

"*Lev! You won't have enough fuel to get back!'*

Lev's heart pounded, blood throttling every vein. His mind was clear. If the lunar gravity was one-sixth of Earth's, he could stop the thrusters and land Laelaps safely so long as they were within a meter of the surface. That had never been attempted, but he was certain it would work.

"*No fuel left!*" CAPCOM cried. "*Abort and return!*"

There was no going back. It was just one meter to the surface.

"Stopping engines," Lev said, reaching toward that button and pressing it—an action filled with his every hope and dream.

The thrusters weakened, and Laelaps hovered in place. Nathan froze and stared at Lev, dumbfounded. Lev watched the control panel, awaiting the contact light.

The thrusters shut off, and the module stopped shaking. As the gray haze covering the windows slowly cleared, a crater edge beside them came into view. Finally, a blue light caught Lev's eye.

"The contact light!" Nathan exclaimed.

The module's sensor probes had touched the lunar surface. After a moment that felt like an eternity, Laelaps shuddered, its legs settling on the ground. The light jolt ran through Lev's entire body.

Rather than toppling over, Laelaps had stabilized. The module had landed safely.

Lev was ready to explode, but he kept calm, forcing a smile to his tense face. "We made it."

Nathan cracked a smile of his own. "That we did."

"We've landed on the moon." The moment he spoke the words,

the reality of their accomplishment churned in Lev's stomach. His whole body trembled, and he took a deep breath. "Prepare for post-landing surveyance."

Lev and Nathan bumped elbows to congratulate each other, then worked through their post-landing checklist. They turned off descent systems and fed verb sixty-eight into DSKY to run the landing confirmation program.

"*This's New Marseille,*" CAPCOM said worriedly. "*Laelaps? What's your status?*"

"We're somewhere on the lunar surface!" Lev declared. "Laelaps fulfilled its destiny."

A few moments passed before CAPCOM cried, "*Do you know how worried we were?! That show you two staged was a heart-stopper!*"

Lev heard mission control's applause and cheers under CAPCOM's—Aaron's—voice. They were celebrating.

More than anything, Lev wanted to talk to Irina. He looked at Slava waiting 15,000 meters above them. "Slava, we're on the lunar surface. Do you read?"

Seconds ticked by, and then Irina's voice came through like a dim star hidden behind thin clouds. "*This is Slava. Great work. Congratulations.*"

"Thank you, Irina." Lev's heart overflowed with warmth.

"*You did it. The world's second cosmonaut became the first man on the moon.*" Through the light static, Lev heard Irina weeping.

"It's all because of you. I never would've made it here if we hadn't met."

"*No. You were my instructor. I expected nothing less. Er, by the way...*" Irina lowered her voice. "*You're aware that mission control's listening to everything we say, right?*"

A wave of embarrassment washed over Lev. Nathan couldn't hide his smirk, though he pretended not to hear a thing.

"Whoops." Lev chuckled. "You wouldn't think I was raised in a country where we're always wary of eavesdropping, would you?"

"*I'm approaching the far side of the moon. You can tell me about your adventures on your way back, Ivy.*"

Ending transmission, Irina had called him by a nickname that referenced the ivy keepsake she'd given him. Nobody listening would know what she meant except Lev, who knew the ivy symbolized eternal love.

Lunar gravity, though only one-sixth of Earth's, was much easier to deal with than zero gravity. Lev and Nathan felt light and free as they ran through their return flight simulation, turning most of Laelaps's systems off.

They were scheduled to sleep six hours to prepare for work outside the module, but with his dreams dangling right there like bait in front of a fish, Lev knew he wouldn't sleep a wink. He desperately yearned to explore. If they were forced to abort and return to Slava before that, he'd be heartbroken, so he and Nathan agreed to request a change in schedule.

Mission control was happy to give permission. *"That's fine. It'll wreak havoc on our Earth timetable, though. You'll mess up the television broadcast schedule and maybe which ground station gets your video data."*

"We're more than happy to field any complaints upon our return," replied Lev.

He and Nathan ate a little, then got ready. This wasn't Earth, where you could simply pop outside for a stroll. To leave Laelaps, the crew first had to don space suits within its cramped confines, then match the module's air pressure to the moon's atmosphere to prevent damage to the entry hatch. That took a long time—long enough that they could quickly nap. Finally, half a day after Lev asked to revise the schedule, the pressure meter's needle stopped.

"It's fine to open the hatch now, right?" Lev asked, a bit worried.

"I'd say so," Nathan replied.

Lev was about to head outside when he glanced at his watch. "Wait a second." He closed comms for a moment to talk to Nathan privately. "If we head out now, we'll walk on the lunar surface while Irina's flying past the far side of the moon. How about we wait until she's back?"

“Sounds good, Lev.”

Turning comms back on, Lev told CAPCOM they’d exit Laelaps in twenty minutes.

“Understood. You’ll leave just as Slava reemerges. Great timing.”

Perhaps mission control had caught on to the cosmonaut’s motives. Lev couldn’t help feeling a little bashful.

After twenty minutes, Nathan reached for the hatch. “Here we go.”

The opened hatch sucked the air from the module. Lev stared out the eighty-centimeter square as the moon revealed itself.

Securing the hatch, Nathan motioned Lev through. “Time to pay respects to the moon goddess.”

“See you out there.”

Nathan put a hand on Lev’s shoulder, a hint of awe in his eyes. “This historic human achievement will endure for eternity, and you alone were entrusted with it. It’ll only last an instant, so make the most of it!”

“Thank you, Nathan!”

Lev lay on his stomach to pass through the hatch, careful not to damage it on his way out. He approached the ladder, used a handhold to stand upright, and then descended step by careful step. With each rung, his heart pounded harder. Halfway down, he pulled a cord on Laelaps’s exterior to start a small camera attached to one of the module’s legs. The camera would film them at work and remit the data to Earth. A few seconds later, Lev’s comms erupted with cheers.

“We’re getting your lunar footage!” announced CAPCOM.

As Lev stood on the bottom rung, he was struck by a strange sensation he hadn’t felt in training. The bottom of the ladder wasn’t connected to the footpad touching the lunar surface. The module’s legs apparently hadn’t compressed as much as expected upon landing. Lev would have to drop much farther than expected to the footpad—the equivalent of about three rungs. That wasn’t a huge problem; releasing the ladder rail, he jumped carefully. His body, wondrously light even in his heavy space suit, landed softly on the footpad.

“I’m standing on Laelaps’s footpad, just a few centimeters from

the lunar surface,” Lev reported. As he had during training, he scrutinized the ground and described what he saw. “It’s covered in fine, dusty sand.” That was what had obscured the windows as they landed.

Lev looked up. The sunlight streaming over the rocky surface was blindingly bright, although there was deep darkness past the nearby crater edge. Right hand gripping the ladder, he faced outward, away from the footpad.

“I’m now stepping onto the lunar surface.”

Lifting his left boot, Lev slowly placed it on the moon. The ground sank underfoot, then held. Lev stomped hard, testing its strength.

Finally, he had arrived on the moon. To get here, people had poured gigantic amounts of manpower, time, money, and resources into developing machinery that didn’t exist. They’d made sacrifices and mourned loved ones, all for this instant—the moment when someone stepped onto the surface of an unexplored world. This feat encapsulated people’s wisdom, dreams, and ambitions.

“This one small step is a giant leap for the nations of East and West.” That was exactly what the NWO had told Lev to say, but he wasn’t done. “It’s so incredibly insignificant. So trivial.” Removing his hand from the ladder, Lev planted both feet on the moon. “But with these steps I take today, *everyone* is soaring into the bounds of space.”

He’d decided he deserved to voice his own thoughts. After all, he’d risked life and limb to get here. They’d hoist the Zirnitran and Arnackian flags anyhow, but Laelaps’s rocket engine would blow over those symbols of greed and ambition, and they’d fade in the sunlight before they were next seen.

Lev took a few steps from the module, his body floating up and landing gently. Moondust arced through the air, then fell straight down. Particles of sand glittered like glass in the sunlight. It was beautiful. Before he even realized it, his space suit and boots were stained the color of the moon.

The surroundings struck Lev with unbelievable clarity. He could see all the way to the horizon. The sunlit areas were yellow, but the rest of the lunar surface was gray, like concrete. The vast, boundless landscape lacked even a hint of life, and now Lev had placed human footprints upon it.

It wasn’t time to get sentimental yet. Using tools from the module,

Lev began surveying the lunar surface. He started by digging up a sample of the ground underfoot with a specially designed shovel and placing it in a bag.

With the sample of moondust was a small rock. There was nothing remotely colorful about it. It was rough, dull, and gray, a far cry from a jewel one might present their beloved.

Holding that moon rock, Lev looked up to the stars in search of Irina. In the vast darkness of space, he spotted a blue jewel that glimmered like the stone in her necklace.

Lev gazed at the jewel, entranced, as tears welled in his eyes. They trickled down his cheeks one-sixth as fast as they would have on Earth. He had to tell Irina how vividly the moonstone she treasured sparkled here on the moon. It stung Lev's heart that he couldn't show her this view directly. But he believed that one day, she'd come here herself.

Putting a hand to the ivy in his shoulder pocket, he made a promise. *My new dream is to bring you to the moon.*

Perhaps it wouldn't happen till they were both fifty or even a hundred. Or maybe it wouldn't happen until they were ghosts. The time didn't matter. What mattered was that someday, they'd find a way to come here together.



Scarlet Eyes

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LAVA HAD BEEN CRAMPED for so long. Now its interior was nearly empty and silent save for the ventilator's quiet drone.

When Lev took his first steps on the moon, Irina had looked for him on Mare Tranquillitatis, but she hadn't spotted Laelaps among the rocks and craters. Even so, she was happy to share in the historic moment through the comms.

Slava was orbiting the far side of the moon, so Irina was alone, separated from the three billion people on the other side. When she thought about the life that might exist in space's outer reaches, she wondered if perhaps there was even life on *this* side of the moon. If so, it remained a mystery where and what that life was.

It was all too easy to let her imagination run wild; that was how Irina passed the time. Bored of the moon's dull scenery, she put on a cassette of ambient noise, closing her eyes and floating on her back as she listened.

After Laelaps left for the moon, Irina had continued CSM tasks like system inspections, orbiting while Lev and Nathan explored the surface. Aside from periodic checks, there was nothing to do until they returned. She was alone in the depths of space, though it didn't compare to the fear she'd felt arriving in Zirnitra as a test subject.

When Slava had released Laelaps, and the lunar module left on its journey to the surface, loneliness had rippled through her. Watching the beautiful flames from the inverted module's thrusters, she'd messaged the crew, then simply prayed for their safety. *Just stay calm and you'll be fine*, she silently told Lev. Although she'd almost despaired at Laelaps's constant alarms, she couldn't do anything but monitor transmissions and hope for the best.

Irina had always wanted to descend to the moon with Lev, but she was no longer a child. She knew better than to voice such selfish thoughts. With her in the lunar module, they might fail; Nathan was far more skillful and knowledgeable. She actually wanted to thank him, although her personality didn't allow that frankness.

While she hadn't stood on the lunar surface herself, her dream had

—against all odds—come true. She was overjoyed to view the moon so closely. As she'd expected, no evidence suggested vampires had ever lived there.

As she stared at that seemingly endless wasteland, Irina's mind drifted along with her. She wondered whether the moon would eventually fall prey to battles for conquest, like Earth. Or would Arnack and Zirnitra improve relations and set their sights on Mars? Would the moon become home to an international space station, or revert to a sight people gazed at from Earth?

However long Irina mulled it over, the future was a hazy mist. All she knew for certain was that Lev had landed on the moon, and his words passed a torch to future generations in space development.

She hoped the world saw vampires and dhampirs differently now that Nosferatu had been key to Project Soyuz. Perhaps their standing would rise, and her and Kaye's efforts would inspire dhampirs. Space might become a vehicle to advance Nosferatu rights. Vampire and dhampir lives *had* improved over the past decade.

All that was just speculation, however. Discrimination wouldn't disappear overnight, and Arnack's human-dhampir conflicts were only intensifying. When equality finally came, would peace accompany it?

Irina didn't think so. She could picture enraged dhampirs taking revenge by oppressing weaker humans. Those conflicts wouldn't resolve easily—they'd continue worldwide, whoever took power. As long as people lived only for themselves, life would be plagued by conflict and discord. That was the story of the people of Earth.

If they eventually built a space station or moon base, it would just be open to a select few. And if people relocated to other planets and began new civilizations, differences would emerge between them. Only mass-produced machines could avoid that.

Irina wondered how Earth would change once she returned. What would she and Lev do after Project Soyuz? Keep serving as cosmonauts? Could they live peacefully? Would the NWO have orders for them?

In the midst of those thoughts, Irina floated into a wall, bumping her head. "Ouch!"

It felt like a message from the galaxy. Had Lev heard her thoughts, he might've given her a light bump too. "*Let's look on the bright side,*" he'd say.

“What am I doing?” Irina sighed as she floated toward the floor. Her penchant for paranoia and negativity was as strong now as when she’d been afraid of heights. Whatever happened, she and Lev would return to living on Earth.

To lift her spirits, Irina changed the tape to a favorite song of hers: “My Beloved.”

If only feelings were as easy to change as tapes, she reflected. Then a thought hit her: *How about imagining the good with the bad?*

As her favorite song filled the CSM, she thought back to the first time she’d heard it at the jazz bar with Lev. Remembering the feelings that had tickled her heart, she let her imagination paint a new dream. Slava’s crew would return to Earth. People would celebrate their historic achievement worldwide. All kinds of television specials would air. Children and adults alike would be captivated by more than just the moon—they’d long for the sight of Mars and Jupiter. Unable to ignore their demands, the governments and the NWO would continue crewed space development well into the future.

Even in a world like that, some people would never recognize Nosferatu achievements, and some media outlets and individuals would denounce human-vampire relationships. Others would claim space development was pointless, farcical, or fake.

Irina couldn’t imagine a world free of that negativity, and they’d never reach mutual understanding with those who refused to listen. She wondered what she could do. There’d be no choice but to live alongside those people, aware of condemnation but avoiding those who expressed it.

Setting those unpleasant thoughts aside, Irina focused on her loved ones. She imagined celebrating at Bart and Kaye’s wedding, picturing the beautiful dress Kaye would wear. Sundancia would attend, and she’d tell the queen about their trip to the moon. She couldn’t describe the descent, of course, but that was Lev’s role.

What does one-sixth gravity feel like, anyway?

After the wedding, Irina would go to Anival to confirm her safe return. She’d tell them there was no trace of vampires on the moon and that it wasn’t habitable anyhow. Then she’d explain that the valley—with its abundant greenery, clear waters, and fresh air—was a much better place to live. Afterward, she’d ask a government official to grant

vampires more freedom, and they'd do so. The world would stop calling her home cursed.

She'd be sure to visit Anya to make aspic and celebrate the mission with Lev. Irina wasn't sure whether Anya drank; if she did, they'd toast with nastoyka. If not, lemon seltzer was fine. The three would go see a movie. It didn't matter what they watched—even a campy horror film about vampires would be fun. Irina could picture Anya getting worked up, cheeks puffing out as she shouted, "Vampires like this don't exist!"

Roza and Dasha would live quiet, happy lives. They wouldn't be tools for propaganda, and the media wouldn't hound them. Roza might even meet someone she could spend the rest of her life with. She was such a lovely person; Irina imagined her partner would be equally wonderful.

Irina's training had been so hectic that she never got to enjoy Arnack, so she'd ask Odette to show her around. She'd be sure to visit the dhampir neighborhood in the Moonlight District. Odette herself would visit the moon as a crew member for Project Soyuz II. This time, Irina would be training the crews.

Project Soyuz II's outset would involve lots of private businesses. They'd hold a lottery, and the winner would receive a trip to space, like the Chief had talked about. Would he still be asleep? Either way, Irina would tell him a spacecraft had been named after him—and traveled to the moon and back. Lev would visit the Chief with her, of course.

Irina and Lev's future would be bright and happy. They'd keep working in space development. Irina hadn't thought about exactly what they'd do after Project Soyuz, but they'd apply their experience to advance space travel. In their free time, they'd travel the world to talk about history's first crewed lunar landing. Irina wanted to revisit all the cities they'd been to.

Before long, the contents of talks like "Prepare for Space Travel!" would become reality. Eventually, anyone would be able to go to space. It wouldn't require intense training. Science would need to advance by leaps and bounds; no one would want to wear a suffocating space suit or travel in a cramped spacecraft. Irina's water pistol "magic" had basically just been a trick, but hopefully she'd conveyed to people that space was amazing.

Then there was the child she and Lev might have one day. She'd

told Lev their offspring would live a life of misfortune, but that wasn't true. She had just let her worst nightmares get the best of her and abandoned the thought of fighting for their happiness. If they could reach the moon, nothing could stop them being happy together.

If Irina really had a child, she'd hand down her necklace. It wasn't an actual moon rock, but it was still beautiful and glimmered the same blue as the stars. By the time their child was Irina's age, space development would have advanced exponentially. A space station would orbit Earth. That would be the starting point for attempts to reach Mars. Irina, meanwhile, would travel through the space station to visit the moon with Lev. After all, she'd still only achieved half her dream.

“Slava, respond,” Lev said suddenly. *“This is Laelaps from Mare Tranquillitatis.”*

When had comms returned? Looking out the window, Irina saw Earth's face shining a beautiful blue past the moon.

“Th-this is Slava!” she replied frantically. “It's Irina!”

Lev laughed. He must've heard the panic in her voice. *“So bored up there, you fell asleep?”*

“You have no idea.”

“We're finished on the surface. We're preparing to return,” Lev reported, sounding satisfied, though his tone was tinged with loneliness.

“Roger. I'll prepare for pickup.”

“I got you-know-what, by the way. Be careful—it might burn Slava to a crisp.”

“Roger. Don't bring any weird microorganisms back with you.”

“Understood. We'll be in touch.”

After that exchange, Irina began inspections for rendezvous and docking. Arriving at the moon had taken days, but just like that, they were about to part. The lunar horizon arced against the eternal darkness of space. Above it floated the shining blue jewel they called Earth. Both were specks of dust in space's boundless depths. Likewise, the moon landing's success barely registered in the history of the universe.

There was no point making comparisons. Irina was minuscule among it all, but Earth seemed huge to her, and much more beautiful

than the dull gray moon. There on Earth, she'd live each moment to the fullest, carve out the future she imagined, and achieve her dream. The planet was full of charm and wonder. Whenever times were difficult, and whenever she felt she might break, Irina could look to the sky and remind herself, *Nothing's as hard as going to the moon.*

It was time to say goodbye to this new world and return to the place they called home.



Special Thanks

⟨ CALL SIGN APPLICATIONS ⟩

Gengorou

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Yuni

⟨ REFERENCES AND SUPPORT ⟩

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From the Author

Keisuke Makino

Volume 7 completes *Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut*. Thank you so much for your support. Please watch the anime as well. The afterword is online.

Books by Keisuke Makino

Flick & Break

Flick & Break, Vol. 2

Flick & Break, Vol. 3

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut

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Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut, Vol. 5

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut, Vol. 6

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut, Vol. 7

From the Artist

KAREI

Drawing the face of the moon while eating a Tsukimi hamburger would really stir up the feels...or so I thought, but it didn't. Thank you for reading the final volume!

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